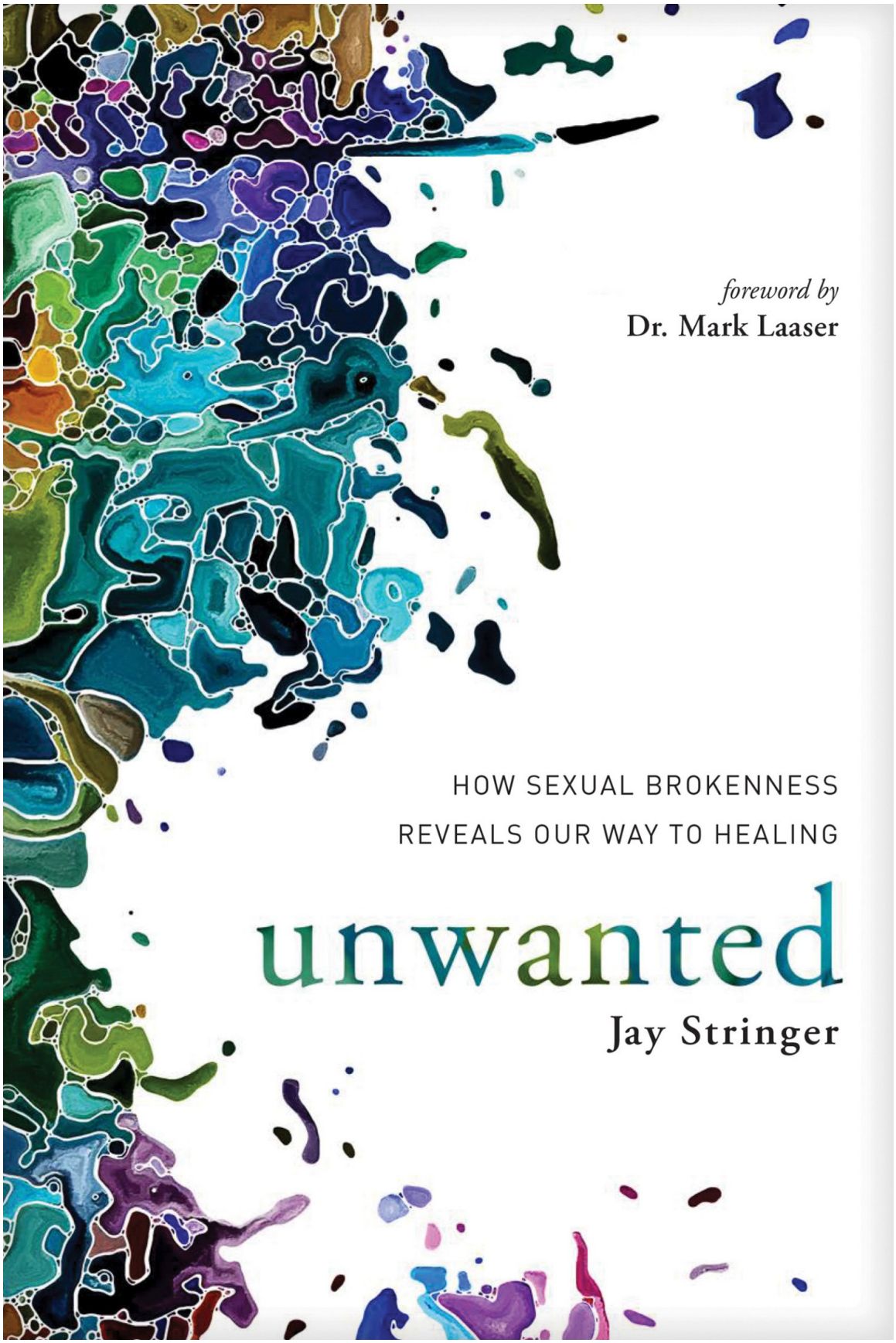
foreword by
Dr. Mark Laaser

HOW SEXUAL BROKENNESS
REVEALS OUR WAY TO HEALING

unwanted

Jay Stringer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Unwanted is, without rival, the best book on broken sexuality I have ever read. It is heartbreaking and hope-restoring, and with immense kindness, it proceeds to where most work stalls and refuses to enter. Jay's research is groundbreaking. No one has pursued these dark waters with as much light-offering, data-bound research. Even more, Jay offers the heart of the gospel in a manner that doesn't trivialize sin or addiction but lifts the battle up to the ambivalence we have about freedom. This book will be a classic that anchors us in brilliant research, soul honesty, and biblical reflection.

DAN B. ALLENDER, PHD, author of *Healing the Wounded Heart* and coauthor of *God Loves Sex*

Over the past twenty-five years of ministry, I've witnessed many men and women floundering in a sea of hopelessness due to their own (or a spouse's) sexual brokenness. That's why I'm so excited about and grateful for Jay's work in the field of sexual addiction and restoration. If you're hungry for deep healing, or searching for practical ways to help others heal from unhealthy emotional entanglements and sexual dysfunction, *Unwanted* will be an incredibly sharp tool in your tool belt!

SHANNON ETHRIDGE, MA, author of *Every Woman's Battle*

Jay Stringer's *Unwanted* demonstrates a depth of insight and wisdom that I found stunning! I have been counseling men and women in the church who are battling with sexual brokenness for over thirty years and have written fifteen books on the subject. Yet I found Jay's grasp of the subject profound, and the graphic illustrations he used to summarize various points were worth the price of the book alone. It will truly help many come out of their shame and finally find freedom. Stringer is a top gun, and I would fly with him into combat anytime!

DR. TED ROBERTS, cofounder of Pure Desire Ministries International

As bleak as the landscape of sexual brokenness may appear, God always raises up his people to proclaim a path to healing and redemption. Jay Stringer is one of those voices. *Unwanted* is a courageous, insightful work

that challenges us to look beyond the *what* into the *why* of our sexual sin. This book will undoubtedly equip many on the journey to freedom.

DR. JULI SLATTERY, cofounder of Authentic Intimacy and author of *Rethinking Sexuality*

Unwanted's breakthrough research into the origins of sexual brokenness convincingly shows why tips and techniques to combat it have failed to lead to the freedom we desire and are designed to enjoy. *Unwanted* is a life-giving room of grace where all of us can find relief from the heartache of sexual shame. Jay Stringer invites you to know your story and dare to believe that you will be loved more—not less—for what it reveals. The culture, including the church, has needed this book for decades. Thousands will experience God's kindness and healing through it.

BRUCE MCNICOL, president of Trueface

If sexuality is anything, it's complicated! This thing that involves our whole selves—body, mind, spirit—this thing that can compel our behavior but is also shaped by our habits. In *Unwanted*, Jay Stringer shines a spotlight on one important aspect of our sexual lives—our personal history, particularly the way our sexuality intersects with our brokenness over time. By inviting us to be compassionate with ourselves and curious about our story, he helps us to look beyond the shame and embarrassment that so often deaden us and toward real, authentic, healthy ways of relating to ourselves, our loved ones, our community, and even God.

DEBRA HIRSCH, author of *Redeeming Sex*

A thorough theoretical framework and nuanced vocabulary are critical tools when dealing with unwanted sexual desires, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Even with these, the journey to persevere requires real stories of personal discovery and hope. In *Unwanted*, Jay Stringer not only provides a set of tools to understand these matters but also offers a story and vision for those who find themselves in dark places.

WILLIAM M. STRUTHERS, author of *Wired for Intimacy*

Wow. This book is a weapon for freedom and flourishing in a world bombarded with sexual pain and brokenness. If you are tired of the blame-and-shame methods filled with guilt and fear around sex, Jay offers a life-changing alternative: restored sexual wholeness and flourishing. Sex is good? Indeed. Refreshingly honest and humble, Jay refuses avoidance and despair around the most painful oppression of our time. Using a divine strategy with incredible skill, Jay enters our brokenness and finds the keys to our sexual freedom and wholeness within the depth of our pain. Get this book. Read this book. Let the healing and freedom come.

DANIELLE STRICKLAND, cofounder of Infinitum and author of *The Ultimate Exodus*

Unwanted changes the conversation on sexual brokenness for this generation of believers. Jay Stringer engages the *why* beneath our sexual shame with groundbreaking research and the wisdom of a counselor.

JOSH MCDOWELL, author and speaker

Unwanted enters the heartache of sexual brokenness and reveals the deepest longings within us for redemption. Recognizing how evil seeks to misdirect our longings, Jay illuminates how even our sin can reveal important truths about ourselves and our unique path to redemption. Through groundbreaking research and a heart for the gospel, Stringer invites us to the critical task of finding hope and meaning within our sexual lives. He clearly shows how Christ invites us to depth of desire, not death of desire.

CHRISTOPHER WEST, author, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing*

Sexual brokenness is the most significant and underaddressed topic affecting men today. Jay's work opens the door to a new conversation for all of us who need language to talk about it more transparently. Jay's powerful research and clinical insights show how our earliest stories plant seeds that go on to hold tremendous power over us in our adult lives. *Unwanted* is going to lead you to an understanding of your life that can guide you to freedom.

JAMES ANDERSON, president and CEO, New Canaan Society

Jay Stringer is one of those rare leaders whose lives will leave an indelible mark on generations to come. In *Unwanted*, an incredible convergence of story, science, and theology makes it so accessible, it becomes transformational. It is the most impactful treatise I've ever read on how to understand that our pain and brokenness are actually pathways to full healing and restoration. I'm convinced that *Unwanted* addresses the source of sexual brokenness in our world. If we want to see our hearts restored and dismantle the forces that seek to ruin the beauty of sex, this book will be our road map.

JASON PAMER, writer and producer, *The Heart of Man*

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Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing

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To the 3,800 men and women who completed the research study on unwanted sexual behavior—may your stories light the path to freedom.

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Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Chapter One: A Theology of Unwanted Sexual Behavior

Part 1: How Did I Get Here?

Chapter Two: Setting the Course of Unwanted Sexual Behavior

Chapter Three: Dysfunctional Family Systems

Chapter Four: Abandonment

Chapter Five: Triangulation

Chapter Six: Trauma as Soul Loss

Chapter Seven: Sexual Abuse

Part 2: Why Do I Stay?

Chapter Eight: The Six Core Experiences of Unwanted Sexual Behavior

Chapter Nine: Three Hijackers of Our Souls

Chapter Ten: The Sex Industry

Part 3: How Do I Get Out of Here?

Chapter Eleven: Transforming Self

Chapter Twelve: A New Sexual Story

Chapter Thirteen: Exercise Attunement and Containment in Your Relationships

Chapter Fourteen: Practice Conflict and Repair in Your Relationships

Chapter Fifteen: Pursue Strength and Vulnerability in Your Relationships

Chapter Sixteen: Learning to Invest in Community

Chapter Seventeen: Community as a Place to Experience Structure and Mutual Support

Chapter Eighteen: Community as a Place to Offer Empathy for the Stories of Others

Chapter Nineteen: Community as a Place to Discover Purpose

Conclusion

Research Appendix

Acknowledgments

About the Author

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Foreword

WE ARE IN THE MIDST of a great sexual crisis in our culture. Despite our having more knowledge than ever about relationships, how our brains process and create pleasure, and how God ultimately designed us for sexual desires, sexual brokenness is at an all-time high. The beauty and holiness of sexuality have been unimaginably corrupted by the sex-trade industry, the explosive growth and ubiquity of pornography, and a fading moral code guarding any degree of sanctity about sex. Many are calling this crisis a "tsunami," like the one that hit Japan some years ago. The fallout and debris are polluting our oceans.

At such a time as this, in which the sexual crisis is ever growing, we immensely need this book. While we recognize the calamity of unwanted sexual behavior in our world today, we do not grieve as those without hope: At the heart of the gospel is the belief that our brokenness does not separate us from the love of God. It *connects* us.

One of the standard Christian responses to sexual brokenness has been to simply attempt to "turn off" sexual fantasy or problematic sexual behavior. We do this, at times, for good reasons: We do not want our hearts seduced by the things of this world. Most of us truly want to honor God with our lives. But saying no to sexual perversion is not an adequate paradigm for *recovery.* In Romans 12:2, the apostle Paul offered a fuller vision for how our hearts and minds change. We are instructed not to be conformed to the ways of the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Renewing our minds is not about turning *off* our minds. It is about turning *to* pursue the deepest affections God has given us.

Modern neuroscientific research has demonstrated the scientific accuracy of Paul's claim by showing the brain is in fact plastic. That is to say, it can actually build new pathways and new associations! This is a physiological dynamic, not just a spiritual one. I participated in a brain scan study at Vanderbilt University in which the researchers could actually see a new pathway in my brain. This pathway had the ability to override, even at a deep level in my brain, the powerful effects of all the pornography and sexual activity that I had participated in during the years of my own sexual addiction. I have now been in recovery for thirty-one years, and my brain has been transformed and renewed.

I have seen thousands of people with sexual brokenness begin their own journeys to transformation. One of the ways this has happened is through a concept I pioneered over three decades of ministry and counseling. This concept, now faithfully advanced in Jay Stringer's work, is that our sexual fantasies are nothing to be ashamed of. They are, in fact, our greatest teachers.

Many people have told me they almost fell out of their chairs when they heard me speak about this. My point is that sexual fantasy is often created out of a need to satisfy the deepest emotional and spiritual longings we have. For example, it is no wonder many of the men I counsel often fantasize when they are lonely or angry. The fantasy is an attempt to reconcile, in their own strength, all that seems broken around them. When we pay attention, sexual fantasies are messengers from our souls to reveal our deepest longings. And these longings are good.

This is just one of the many reasons I'm grateful for *Unwanted*. This is a book centered on an audacious claim: The specifics of your sexual brokenness can reveal your unique way to healing. Jay Stringer addresses the adverse impact of our sin and addiction while showing us how the particulars of these realities can guide us to our long-awaited healing and liberation. It is my sincere hope that this book is read widely, both within and outside the church.

One of my greatest joys is getting to know some of the bright emerging thought leaders in this field. Such a man is Jay Stringer. *Unwanted* is full of Jay's clinical skill, deep theological understanding, and groundbreaking research that I know you will find fascinating. His ardent insight and heart for the gospel are going to shape the field for years to come. You will pick this book up because of your struggle with unwanted sexual behavior, but through its pages, you will discover a fuller vision of healing and desire than you ever imagined.

This book is a blessing, one that I know you will greatly benefit from.

Mark Laaser, MDiv, PhD
Faithful & True
APRIL 12, 2018

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Introduction

The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.

BRUCE MARSHALL, *THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND FATHER SMITH*

When you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL*

A MAN I WAS COUNSELING—I'll call him Jeffrey—sat in my office a week before Christmas. It was our first session together, after he had been arrested on charges of soliciting prostitution. Jeffrey is one of hundreds of thousands of men who buy sex in the United States. He told me he had bought sex on Saturday mornings since his college days in Pennsylvania. Halfway into our session he remarked, "I don't understand all the reasons I do this. But I know there is an amazing feeling that comes over me when I lock eyes with a woman on the streets."

I asked Jeffrey to tell me a bit about what Saturday mornings were like for him as a child. He replied, "My mom would usually leave my older brother and me home alone on the weekends because she worked a second job. We were always on the verge of poverty, and she was gone quite a bit." His father had left the family when Jeffrey was eleven years old. He continued, "My older brother was more of a loner. He could stay inside listening to music or playing video games for hours. I wasn't like that. I usually just rode my bike around the neighborhood."

I asked Jeffrey if he may have been out looking to find something or someone if he rode his bike on a usual basis. He thought for a moment and said, “Sure. I remember cruising through my neighborhood trying to find girls I knew from middle school. I would ride around for hours just to see if I could get ‘that look’ from a classmate.”

Twenty years later, unbeknownst to him, Jeffrey’s Saturday-morning ritual was essentially the same. The bike became an SUV. Cruising around for a middle-school crush became his approach to finding exploited women. A mom with a second job was now a spouse whose job at a concert venue required her to work weekends. As an adult, Jeffrey was recreating the dynamics of his childhood. Like most of us, though, he had no awareness of doing so.

At the end of our first session, it was apparent that Jeffrey’s strategy to ride away from the loneliness and anger of a painful childhood had become the very vehicle now driving him into a life of crisis. This is often the case with our unwanted sexual behavior. The behaviors that help us survive our formative exiles become increasingly problematic when we expect them to work over a lifetime.

The faces Jeffrey sought out in middle school, which brought him a sense of validation and even rest, were now costing him more than tens of thousands of dollars a year when we added up all of the expenses associated with buying sex. These financial costs were only a microcosm of all the other damage occurring in his life: secrecy and isolation in his marriage, anxiety about losing his corporate position if he were discovered, and a deep-seated belief that shame would be his closest ally. The more he bought sex, the more unwanted he felt in every realm of life.

What Is Unwanted Sexual Behavior?

Unwanted sexual behavior is any sexual behavior that continues to persist in our lives despite our best efforts to change it. This could be pornography use, affairs, using hookup apps, or buying sex. Our behavior could meet the criteria for hypersexual or compulsive sexual behavior, but it could also

involve infrequent struggles that keep us from a life of sexual integrity. The longer our unwanted sexual behavior persists unaddressed, the more likely it is that we will feel unwanted as well.

You might be able to relate to Jeffrey in some way. Maybe you find yourself involved in sexual behavior that is unwanted. Or maybe you have loved ones struggling with unwanted sexual behavior and are trying to understand why they indulge in behavior that so clearly damages the relationships they claim to care about most.

The Crisis of Unwanted Sexual Behavior

The statistics associated with unwanted sexual behavior in our world are staggering. The Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health conservatively estimates that between 3 percent and 5 percent of all Americans can be classified as addicted to sex.[1] This represents an alarming nine to sixteen million people. Additionally, 64 percent of thirteen- to twenty-four-year-olds intentionally watch pornography at least once a week.[2] By the time children become teens and young adults, 62 percent of them will have received a sext (sexually explicit image via text), and 41 percent will have sent one.[3] And if all that were not enough, the average age of initial involvement in prostitution for girls is estimated between fourteen and eighteen years of age.[4]

Pornography is the most predominant form of unwanted sexual behavior, infiltrating every aspect of the places we live, work, and worship. Consider these statistics:

- Porn use will nearly double the probability of a couple’s getting divorced.[5]
- Approximately 35 percent of all Internet downloads are porn related.[6]
- Porn sites receive more monthly traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined.[7]

- Porn is a $97 billion industry, with as much as $12 billion of that coming from the US.[8]
- About 57 percent of our pastors and 64 percent of our youth pastors struggle or have struggled with pornography.[9]

It should be clear that what Jeffrey is experiencing is not a unique or isolated case.

Lust-Centered Approaches Are Ineffective

The overwhelmingly standard evangelical response to sexual brokenness has been to address it through the lens of "lust management," even declaring war against it. This approach has oversimplified and trivialized a far more complex issue within human sexuality. Efforts to eliminate lust will set us up to manage our sexual lives with a tourniquet. We spend the best years of our lives attempting to stop the flow of lust through darting our eyes from beautiful people, slapping rubber bands around our wrists when we have sexual thoughts, and asking accountability partners, in an attempt to stay vulnerable in community, to keep account of what erotic websites we've visited. I think we can all agree this cannot be what God had in mind for sex and community. The reality that more than half our faith leaders and the great majority of Christians view pornography should indicate that our strategies have proven ineffective.

Our inability to succeed in purity only compounds our pain. And then, in our pain, we default to the same ineffective treatment plan. We spend time in prayer, fast, pursue accountability, and hope that God might change us. The complexity is that the underlying issues that drive our sexual lust and anger do not get examined.

How many of us have ever asked God to help us *understand* our lust? This book is an invitation to heal, but to do so, your current framework for understanding and treating your problems will likely need to be abandoned.

Fantasies Are Road Maps

Despite the overwhelming grip of shame and guilt, I do not believe that sexual fantasies are something to condemn. Sexual arousal is one of the greatest gifts God has given us, and we do not need to spend a lifetime annihilating it. And although some sexual behavior is abhorrent and should be discontinued, addressing sexual struggles *through the lens* of abhorrent behavior intensifies shame, and shames drives us deeper into the very behavior we wish to stop.

There is another approach. It begins by *listening to our lust*.

Sexual failures, Internet searches, and browser histories expose our sin, but far more, they are road maps. Sexual brokenness pinpoints the location of our past harm and highlights the current roadblocks that keep us from the freedom we desire. If we are willing to listen, our sexual struggles will have so much to teach us.

You may not like the "map" you've been given, but to navigate your way out of unwanted sexual behavior, you will need to pay closer attention to what it desires to show you. One evening of deliberate curiosity for your sexual fantasies will take you further into transformation than a thousand nights of prayerful despair.

Sexual Brokenness: The Geography of God's Arrival

Scripture is clear that God moves into human struggle, rather than teleporting us out of it. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, God moves so much into human struggle that he takes on our *sarx*—the New Testament word for the vulnerable, prone-to-sin form of flesh—and "move[s] into the neighborhood" (1:14, MSG). Our sexual brokenness is the geography of God's arrival.

It is my conviction that the God of the universe is neither surprised by nor ashamed of the sexual behavior we participate in. Instead, he understands it to be the very stage through which the work of redemption will be played out in our lives. Present sin is the doorway to the wider work of the gospel to bring healing to the wounds of the past and comfort, even

power, to the difficulties of the present. Therefore, the sooner we assume a posture of curiosity for our sexual brokenness, the more we will prepare our hearts for the redemptive work ahead.

God approaches us for our joy, not due to his disappointment in us. His heart is to exchange beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and praise for despair (see Isaiah 61:3). There is no depth of shame that the love of God cannot reach. There is no story he cannot redeem. The paradox of the gospel is that our failures do not condemn us; they connect us.

In writing this book, I wanted to understand the key drivers of unwanted sexual behavior. Why do we choose some sexual behavior and fantasies and not others? In preparation, I read books, listened to podcasts, and met with leaders and organizations pioneering the fight against pornography. Some brought accountability where there was isolation. A number of organizations introduced software to block the ubiquity of erotic content. And others offered a message of love to those experiencing despair. Although I support each of these endeavors, I knew from my work with clients that there was more going on in their sexual behavior, and therefore more was needed to unlock the doors to freedom.

As a licensed mental-health counselor and ordained minister, I help men and women who tend to have two distinct story lines. For one, they disclose a conscious decision to counteract their current unwanted emotions and experiences. Some feel that their needs are not met and seek out affairs to give them surrogate but shameful experiences of connection. Others struggle with a baseline level of misery and discover that pornography use offers them a temporary reprieve from the difficulties of life.

After I hear my clients' present-day struggles, a second story line often emerges rooted in the formative years of their childhood. They consistently tell stories of unwanted experiences of abandonment or bullying, vague references to "awkward" or "weird" sexual moments with people trusted within their families, experimenting with neighborhood friends, finding family members' porn stashes in "hidden" yet completely obvious locations, and dynamics with mothers or fathers that required deep emotional

enmeshment. These two converging story lines unfolding in my clients' stories revealed the foundational premise of this book: The formative experiences of our childhood (loneliness, pain, sexual arousal, secrecy, and relational ambivalence) are all being repeated in our unwanted sexual behavior as adults.

My work with clients and conversations with leaders in the field led me to the conviction that comprehensive research was needed to get to the root of what is driving unwanted sexual behavior. To do this, I designed an instrument containing more than one hundred questions to collect primary data from individuals who were struggling with sexual behavior they wished to stop. (The survey tables can be found at the back of this book in the appendix.)

More than 3,800 people participated in my study, one of the largest of its kind. The respondents were men and women who sought out nationally and internationally known organizations for guidance in the midst of their sexual brokenness. Their collective courage to discuss some of the most intimate portions of their stories is now revealing insights that will change the course of how we understand and treat unwanted sexual behavior in the decades to come. Throughout this book, I will reveal the key drivers of unwanted sexual behavior I learned from the research. What I can tell you from the outset is that the research shows that our sexual struggles are not random or capricious. There are always reasons. If you want to find freedom, it begins by identifying your specific reasons.

The research findings frame the three parts to this book. Part 1 explores the question "How Did I Get Here?" This section will take you on a journey into the most formative years of your life. You will learn the key childhood events and relational dynamics that most predicted a lifetime of unwanted sexual behavior. Part 2 addresses the question "Why Do I Stay?" This section will explore the present-day difficulties in your life that are most common with thousands of men and women remaining trapped in sexual brokenness. Until these specific drivers are transformed, the use of unwanted sexual behavior is often necessitated. And finally, part 3 answers

the question “How Do I Get Out of Here?” My hope is that by the time you arrive at this question, parts 1 and 2 will have more or less convinced you that until you understand the reasons for your unwanted sexual behavior, attempts to get away from its grip are futile. You will learn how to get out, but each step is rooted in the wisdom gained in the previous two sections.

My Story

We are more likely to be ashamed of our unwanted sexual behavior when we do not understand it. Recognizing the meaning of my fantasies has been one of the most significant aspects of my journey into sexual wholeness.

Several years ago, I found myself on a therapist’s couch exploring sexual fantasies I had been troubled by and ashamed of for more than a decade. Before I named the specifics of my unwanted sexual behavior, I told my therapist that I considered never talking about it in therapy. I, like many of my professional colleagues, had a deep fear that my sexual brokenness would be grounds for disqualification within ministry. She asked me how I had come to this conclusion and noted how odd it would be for me to be involved with the population of men and women I work with without addressing a great deal of my own sexual life. Her words to me were liberating because she located me in my life story, not in my perceived failure.

I went on to tell her some of the unique aspects of my fantasy life and how they had been present with me since I was an early teen. I put my head down and paused. She waited to speak until after I looked back up. “Jay, tell me again about where you come from. What was your role in your family?”

I am a therapist, and I was annoyed at her question. I would have preferred her condemnation. I did not want to talk about my family. I wanted her to be troubled by my confession, even to imply that I should second-guess my desire to be a therapist and minister. She did not do this. Instead, she stood by her question and waited about twenty seconds for me to respond. She was inviting me to *know* and therefore come to *love my story*.

I told her that my parents and siblings used to tell me their problems with one another and how I served as a container for their resentment and concerns.

"If only that were all!" she said playfully. "Anything else?"

I went on to tell her more about my story. I would be an emotional support for my mom when my dad was unhappy or left to attend to his pastoral duties. I even remembered hearing messages on my home answering machine involving various affairs and sexual crises that were happening in the life of the church. I was gifted at being able to read the angry and pain-ridden faces of my mom and offer my life to her as the caring son.

My therapist nodded and said, "And now tell me what you know about the lives of the women who have entered into your fantasy life. I would imagine you are quite gifted in reading their anger and needs. Might it be possible that your fantasies are playing out a similar drama that you played out with your mom?"

I was speechless but felt as if the matrix of my sexual life were finally integrating and clarifying. Her questions helped inform a great deal of my sexual life, including my fantasies, pornography preferences, and style of relating with women. Blankets of shame and condemnation lifted because my therapist was inviting me not primarily to stop my lust but to engage the sexual story I was set up for.

I left the session and wrote down this sentence: "If we fail to engage the ways we were sexualized in the past, we leave open the high probability that these patterns will become more pronounced in the future." Sexual struggles reveal the truth of our stories in ways that will constantly surprise us.

God's Curious Pursuit

There is a story in Genesis 16 about an Egyptian teenager by the name of Hagar. She is brought in as a concubine because Abram and Sarai have been struggling with infertility issues for more than ten years. Hagar, whose

name means “stranger” or “sojourner,” successfully conceives a child for Abram and Sarai. But Sarai, the barren wife, turns on Hagar and unleashes mistreatment. Commentators of this story have remarked that this mistreatment has a particularly cruel bent to it, some even suggesting it to be as severe as sexual assault.[10]

In the next scene, Hagar is on the run, heading into the desert, where by all accounts she will die. It is here in the wilderness, the geography of trauma and death, that a miraculous thing happens. The presence of God finds this pregnant teenager and asks her the two best questions any one of us can be asked when we are in distress: “Where have you come from?” and “Where are you going?” (verse 8).

What I want to underscore is that the voice of the Lord is never filled with accusation or frustration. God’s presence invites us to greater reflection as to how our unwanted lives became the way they are today.

Far more than trying to diagnose you as a sinner or addict, I will ask you questions. You will read about individual accounts and research findings from men and women whose stories have remarkable similarities to your own. Your task is not to draw hard-and-fast conclusions but to be intrigued by the data. Our sexual brokenness, if we pay attention, is revealing our way to healing. As we begin this journey, ask yourself, *Where is it that I come from? And where is it that I am going?* May your heart be curious as you study the great tragedy and beauty that your story reveals.

[1] Stacy Notaras Murphy, “It’s Not about Sex,” *Counseling Today*, December 1, 2011, http://ct.counseling.org/2011/12/its-not-about-sex/.

[2] Quoted in “18 Shocking Stats about the Porn Industry and Its Underage Consumers,” Fight the New Drug, September 5, 2017, https://fightthenewdrug.org/10-porn-stats-that-will-blow-your-mind/.

[3] David Kinnaman, “The Porn Phenomenon,” *Barna* (blog), February 5, 2016, http://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/#.VqZoN_krIdU.

[4] R. Barri Flowers, *Sex Crimes: Perpetrators, Predators, Prostitutes, and Victims*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 2006), 170.
[5] S. L. Perry and C. Schleifer, "Till Porn Do Us Part? A Longitudinal Examination of Pornography Use and Divorce," *Journal of Sex Research* 55, no. 13 (May 12, 2017): 1–3.
[6] "Internet Pornography by the Numbers: A Significant Threat to Society," Webroot, https://www.webroot.com/us/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers.
[7] Alexis Kleinman, "Porn Sites Get More Visitors Each Month Than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter Combined," *Huffington Post*, last modified December 6, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/03/internet-porn-stats_n_3187682.html.
[8] "Things Are Looking Up in America's Porn Industry," *NBC News*, January 20, 2015, https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/things-are-looking-americas-porn-industry-n289431.
[9] Kinnaman, "Porn Phenomenon."
[10] Allen Ross, "Genesis," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1985), 155; Hemchand Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 13.

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CHAPTER ONE

A THEOLOGY OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why God made us so sexual, especially when it often seems to plague us with shame? I've wondered the same thing. What I am struck by is the reality that sex was God's idea. And I have to believe that because he invented it, he knows the power it will render in our lives.

Let's think about that: God is the designer of erotic pleasure. The clitoris, for example, is the only organ in the human body that serves no other function except for providing an avenue to sexual pleasure. God's mind, like ours, is sexual. We are made in his image and therefore don't need to feel ashamed that we are sexual beings.

Contrary to what we often conclude at the height of our sexual brokenness, our sexuality is not an impediment to knowing God. Sex shows us just how much he is committed to giving us beauty and pleasure. Sex, if we allow it, will awaken us to the deepest reservoirs in our souls for pleasure and connection. There will be times we experience the madness of our sexual desire, but there are also times when we allow the passion of sex to lead us to imagination of how God desires us to pursue all aspects of our lives. Sex is one of the most important means through which we will discover the heart of God.

Rather than fearing we're too sexual, we should be more concerned that we have not yet become sexual enough. When I spend time with people experiencing lifelong struggles with unwanted sexual behavior, especially pornography, I'm always struck by how little they enjoy sex. God gave us the most remarkable minds and bodies, specially designed to experience the

fullness of fantasy and pleasure. If we move out from our hovels of sexual shame and meaningless hookups, there is so much more awaiting us as children of God.

Central to Christian theology is that men and women are sexual beings who are made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, “God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NLT). Bearing God’s image is the essential feature of our identity. No affair, no addiction, and no sexual shame can destroy it.

The concept of an image bearer has been used throughout various empires around the world. Typically, leaders or dictators would construct statues or manufacture coins that bore their images to remind their people about whom they served. Israel’s God, however, is not satisfied with stone statues and manufactured coins; he has something much more beautiful in mind. God creates men and women to reveal his glory—to show the whole world what he is all about.

We see the image of God in one another when a friend pursues us in a season of heartache, when we spend time at a barbeque with friends during an endless summer night, and when we laugh heartily at a good joke. But we see our image-bearing potential most vividly, yet mysteriously, in the stunning experience of sex.

Evil

I am asking you to consider the possibility that evil has been plotting against your sexuality throughout your life. The evil one, Satan, wants to destroy the glory of God, but he cannot. Therefore, he goes after what most *images* this God: women, men, boys, and girls.[11] In the same way that a terrorist might attack the children of a president because a direct attack is too risky, the evil one seeks to mar the distinctive beauty that God gives to us as his children. If you were to set out to attack the image of God, you would need to do more than ridicule how worthless a human pinky toe appears. Instead, you would plot after the most vulnerable, beautiful, and powerful dimension of who we are: our sexuality. This is the mind of evil.

According to John 10:10, the intention of the evil one is to “steal and kill and destroy.” If this is true, I think it is safe to assume that evil would be working deliberately to ruin our sexuality with this threefold approach. C. S. Lewis, in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, wrote,

> There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.[12]

Throughout this book, I intend to keep the line of tension between these two poles taut. Acknowledging the role of evil never negates personal responsibility to mature, and in striving for integrity, we can never underestimate the intent of evil to sideline us.

Evil hates the beauty of sex, and because it cannot abolish its existence, it works to corrupt its essence. Evil succeeds every time we think of sex and subsequently feel damaged, ruined, and out of control in lust. It has completed massive research on us and knows we are far more likely to pursue shameful sexual behavior when we are experiencing difficult emotions. It also knows we are far more likely to be at war with our desires than to pursue greater beauty for our sexual stories. We may find ourselves longing for marriage or a better marriage, but disappointment is all that ever seems to pass. In our loneliness and anger, we may not choose the maturity of growth; instead we accept the invitation of evil to pursue pornography. Evil seduces us away from personal growth and into an escape that will paradoxically inject us with greater shame.

The evil one’s work may appear in overt ways against our sexuality through something like childhood sexual abuse, but his tactics are also more covert. In 2017, the *Boston Globe* released an article titled “The Biggest Threat Facing Middle-Age Men Isn’t Smoking or Obesity. It’s

Loneliness."[13] We live in a day where we have never been so lonely and, at the same time, had such access to pornography. I have to believe that the evil one has schemed for this association.

The way I see the work of evil is like this. For those who have known loneliness, evil seduces them to pursue sex as their most important need. They find sex to be a cheap consolation and in the end discover the original ache of loneliness to be even more intensified. For others, evil will use childhood sexual abuse to steal their ability to be fully present to the pleasure of sex in adulthood. And for millions of men who live with a baseline level of futility, evil baits them with the promise of power within pornography. When they try to get unhooked, their futility is compounded. Evil's tactics are diverse, but the wreckage of shame often looks the same.

Evil's Achilles' Heel

When we see the power of sex at work in the world, we often hear about it destroying society, not creating thriving societies. But sex is about the flourishing of creation, not the release of tension, the medication of pain, or the power to control another. The ancient Greeks used the word *eros* to refer to the power of sexual (or erotic) love and understood it to be the spark of creation. As the story goes, the world was formless, a black hole of nothingness. But then eros entered in. And when it arrived, the whole world had to transform. Mountains rose up, rivers and streams flowed with living water, and flowers blossomed in a brilliant display of color.[14]

The creation-forming power of erotic love highlights the Achilles' heel of evil. Evil cannot create anything out of nothing. It can't clothe a tree with an abundance of beautiful leaves, it can't make hops or grain for beer or spirits, and it can't create the beauty of a human life. But what it can do is promote deforestation, seduce us to drink to the point of alcoholism, and through the production of pornography degrade women and dissolve the integrity of men and women.

The kingdom of darkness is extremely clever, maniacally focused on efficiency. It's been scheming longer than any human empire to mar the things that most reveal God. It wants to destroy the rain forests, promote systems of greed, and pit nations against one another in killing sprees. But worst of all, it wants to destroy our bodies, to mar the very qualities that make us most like God: our beauty, our ability to give and receive pleasure, and our desire to know and be known.

Unwanted Sexual Behavior: Sin or Addiction?

Approaches to healing that are centered on what is wrong with us will never lead to the type of transformation we desire and deserve. The gospel teaches us that we are beloved before any sexual sin or addiction entered into our lives, and we remain so, even at the height of our brokenness. When sin and addiction language overshadows this belovedness, the inevitable outcome is clinical and theological approaches that rely heavily on behavior modification. When sin and addiction language helps reveal and connect us to our belovedness, the desire to change comes from our pursuit of beauty, not our self-contempt or latest strategy to combat sexual desire.

One of the growing realities in our culture is that we use the word *sin* less and less to describe problematic sexual behavior. The preferred word, if we recognize any disorder at all, is now *addiction*. There are aspects of this shift that I find deeply encouraging. This shift is forcing us to exchange our intellectual laziness for a more curious engagement with the origins of our sexual brokenness. What I am discouraged by, however, is that Scripture uses the most beautiful and wise words I have ever read to talk about sin.

I believe we need a model that integrates sin *and* addiction. I've found that the more I understand what the Bible says about sin, the more I understand the nature of addiction, and the more I understand what science reveals about addiction, the more I understand the nature of sin. These concepts need not be pitted against each other. As we will come to see, they dovetail beautifully.

Sin

I follow the brilliant Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, in her two propositions related to sin:

1. Discussion of sin should serve the strengthening of Christian faith, not the weakening of it. “Our concepts of sin should never be fashioned or deployed in a manner designed to harm people, to break their spirits, to marginalize them, to destroy their sense of belovedness, or to constrain the conditions of their flourishing.”[15]
2. Sin is a relational category highlighting our separation from God. “To be in sin is to be alienated from God.”[16] When sin is discussed in our culture, we often imply that it occurs when we do “bad” things. A proper biblical understanding of sin, however, recognizes the relational separation that drives our unwanted behavior.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, a Protestant confessional document, there is a question about how human beings know their misery. It’s an odd question, until you understand that the German word for *misery* is *elend*, meaning to be out of one’s native land, with a deep sense of homesickness. Sexual brokenness can feel so miserable precisely because deep within us is a belovedness that aches to return home. The gospel tells us that our belovedness will never change according to our wanderings. But our belovedness is intended to change our wanderings.

In the New Testament, sin is understood to be an organized economy or even a type of regime. Paul, the Bible’s chief theologian, discussed sin in reference to what it is *against*.[17] Sin is anti-law, anti-righteousness, anti-spirit, anti-life, essentially anything against the regime of God.[18] According to Cornelius Plantinga Jr., former president of Calvin Theological Seminary, “In the biblical worldview even when sin is devastatingly familiar, it is never normal. It is alien. It doesn’t belong in God’s world.”[19]

The irony of sinful sexual behavior is that it is actually *against* sex. It is not that we want *too much* sex; it is that we want too much *anti-sexual* behavior. We know the beauty and power of sex, but we also know when we are pursuing a deviant imitation of a beautiful erotic life. It is not possible to become too sexual for God. It is possible, however, to grow increasingly trapped in anti-sexual behavior.

The biggest biblical idea about sin is that it is an intruder, and therefore "once in the world, the only way for it to survive is to become a parasite on goodness."[20] Think this over. In every childhood story we read, the villain could not be an evil genius without first being a genius. We often wonder how particular people in our society, such as pedophiles or corrupt politicians, can be so seemingly out of touch with empathy. The reality, however, is that they are often acutely aware of the desire their victims have to be chosen and delighted in. Those whom we deem most evil are so damaging precisely because they are skilled at using empathy for exploitive means.

The intelligence and exploitive power of evil come from twisting the good gifts God has given. Nothing about sin is created out of nothing; all its power is trafficked from goodness. "Goodness," said C. S. Lewis, "is, so to speak, itself: badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled."[21]

Plantinga Jr. went on to say that people "may rebel literally for the hell of it, but this is rare. Usually they are after peace of mind, security, pleasure, *Lebensraum*, freedom, excitement. Evil needs good to be evil. Satan himself, as C. S. Lewis explains, is *God's* Satan—a creature of God who can be really wicked only because he comes from the shop of a master and is made from his best stuff."[22] Through this lens, porn users, sex buyers, and adulterers would be seen as under the influence of evil, which seeks to traffic their longings for legitimate experiences and convert them into desires that will lead, in the end, to pain.

One example of where we can see the influence of evil is in prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation. Men who buy sex often experience alienation and shame for purchasing exploitive, entitled sex. The shame then drives them to buy more sex, all the while increasing the excruciating alienation and trauma of the women and girls (and males) whose bodies are purchased. The compounding interest that evil earns from anti-sexual behavior makes it the most profitable enterprise of all time.[23]

The good news is that in Christ, all our sin—past, present, and future—has been atoned for. Therefore, the purpose of addressing sin should never be to corner heavy-laden people with further evidence of their moral failures. Sin language helps people to name their pain and invites them to consider how good yet humbling it would be to return home.

The Father who waits for us is not ashamed of us. On the contrary, he is a cheerful and indiscriminate host.[24] He offers invitations to everyone, particularly those whom society deems most unclean, unworthy, and perverse. What should make us most uncomfortable about sin is not our failures but how loose God is in his table invitations. Can we really be that loved and desired at the depths of our failures? Sin is an opportunity to be loved abundantly.[25]

Addiction

The contemporary definition of *addiction* is only about a hundred years old and refers to a dysfunctional dependence on drugs or behavior such as gambling, sex, or eating. Prior to the twentieth century and a few vague references in Shakespeare, you would need to go back to ancient Rome to find a word similar to our modern use of *addiction*. In Rome, *addictus* referred to someone defaulting on a debt and consequently being assigned to a creditor as a slave until the debt was paid off.[26] The usage is ominous, and in my counseling work, men and women struggling with unwanted sexual behavior often use strikingly similar language to refer to their behavior: “No matter how much I want to be free of it, nothing works.

I'm enslaved to it until I die." The tragedy is that their lives bear this out as they forfeit money, reputation, and ultimately the stunning beauty of their lives to unwanted sexual behavior.

World-renowned addiction expert Dr. Gabor Maté wrote, "Emotional isolation, powerlessness, and stress are exactly the conditions that promote the neurobiology of addiction."[27] One of the greatest insights into this reality came from a study of Vietnam soldiers who became addicted to heroin during their deployment. When the soldiers left the horrors of combat and arrived safely in the United States, 95 percent of them stopped their addiction.[28] The results suggested to researchers that "the addiction did not arise from the heroin itself but from the needs of the men who used the drug."[29] If you want to understand why you are addicted to something, you have to understand the conditions that keep your addiction in place.

Although the study of addiction can teach us a lot, it is not without its limitations. In the treatment of sexual addiction, the premise is that addictions exist because the addict has negative core beliefs about him- or herself. These negative beliefs then set the addict up to remedy the pain through the pleasure found in sexual behavior. Therefore, addiction is primarily a form of medicating oneself. There is much to affirm in this idea, but it overlooks something significant: Addicts know that indulging in their unwanted sexual behavior will result in self-contempt. Every time.

In my view, our self-contempt is not a by-product of unwanted sexual behavior; it is the very aim of it. Through this lens, unwanted sexual behavior is not primarily an attempt to remedy or self-soothe the pain of a wounded child. It is attempting to reenact the formative stories of trauma, abuse, and shame that convinced us we were unwanted to begin with. In other words, we are not addicted primarily to sex or even a disordered intimacy; instead, we are bonded to feelings of shame and judgment.

In this way, unwanted sexual behavior is not seeking medication but rather a familiar poison to deaden our imagination that something could change for the better. As one songwriter wrote, "Every gambler knows that

to lose is what you're really there for."[30]

In order to heal from our unwanted sexual behavior, we need to address both the biological and situational factors that keep our struggle in place. The neurochemicals of sex bring pleasure to our bodies that is even capable of hijacking our motivation and attention. But we also know that sexual behavior does not exist in a neurochemical silo. Sexual arousal is influenced by the relational wounds and present-day difficulties that mark our lives. The insights of nature and nurture are not opposed to one another; they are essential angles for seeing the complex diamond of human behavior.

The Fear of Freedom

When you are involved in unwanted sexual behavior, one of the most maddening dimensions of your life becomes your fight with freedom. You long for liberation, but you also experience a strange comfort in the misery and pleasure your unwanted behavior provides. Jeffrey, whom we met in the introduction, would sometimes describe his identity as a prisoner who was not strong enough to live as a free man. He knew that the pornography he consumed and the sex he purchased were deeply destructive to his life, but when he attempted to stop using them, he felt worse.

Jeffrey likened his fear of freedom to a book he read in college about the Soviet Gulag, a massive system of forced labor camps where some eighteen million people were passed through.[31] One prisoner who escaped decided to turn himself back in. He told his fellow prisoners, "Freedom isn't for us. . . . We're chained to this place for the rest of our lives, even though we aren't wearing chains. We can escape, we can wander about, but in the end we'll come back."[32] Jeffrey and so many battling sexual brokenness continue to participate in slavery because the prospect of life without the dependency makes them too uneasy.

This fear can change, I promise. Your life story set you up to experience the bondage of unwanted sexual behavior, and owning this story with a heart of curiosity and agency will provide the way out. Your sexual

behavior is unwanted because you intuitively know it does not bear the beauty you were made for. God is not ashamed of us. He wants you to know a beauty you never could have conceived of at the height of your despair. I have seen this beauty transform Jeffrey's life and have no doubt you will see it transform your own.

From here, we turn to part 1 of this book, which will explore the question "How did I get here?" One way of thinking about unwanted sexual behavior is to see it as the convergence of two rivers: your past and the difficulties you face in the present. The place where two rivers converge is called a conflux and is where you will find the strongest current. For example, the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers join together in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to form the Ohio River. If you want to understand the Ohio River, you need to take a look at the Allegheny and the Monongahela, as well as their conflux.

Similarly, if you want to understand why sexual struggles exist in your life, you have to understand the tributaries that make the struggles possible. Part 1 of this book will address the primary tributary: the formative stories of your childhood.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Have you ever sensed the work of evil in your life? When? What dimensions of your life do you think it was trying to impact?
- Think of a time when you felt the beauty of your body or sexuality. What images or scenes emerge for you?

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[11] Dan B. Allender, *Healing the Wounded Heart: The Heartache of Sexual Abuse and the Hope of Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 36. Allender wrote, “Evil hates what God reveals in and through the creation of humanity, especially with regard to gender and sexuality. Nothing brings evil greater delight or power than to foul our joy in being a man or a woman through sexual harm or gender confusion on the one hand or dogmatism on the other.”

[12] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), ix.

[13] Billy Baker, “The Biggest Threat Facing Middle-Age Men Isn’t Smoking or Obesity. It’s Loneliness,” *Boston Globe*, March 9, 2017, https://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2017/03/09/the-biggest-threat-facing-middle-age-men-isn-smoking-obesity-loneliness/k6saC9FnnHQCUbf5mJ8okL/story.html.

[14] Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: Dell, 1969), 72–74.

[15] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2009), 102.

[16] Jones, *Trauma*, 102.

[17] Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Sin: Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be* (Christ on Campus Initiative, 2010), 11. His book *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) is an excellent study of the nature of sin, including corruption, deceit, folly, addiction, attacks on God, and flight from God.

[18] Plantinga, *Sin*, 11.

[19] Plantinga, *Sin*, 11.

[20] Plantinga, *Sin*, 11.

[21] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (repr., New York: Macmillan, 1977), 49.

[22] Plantinga, *Sin*, 12. *Lebensraum* translates literally as “living space” and was regularly referenced as the rationale for Nazi Germany’s imperial ambitions.

[23] Allender, *Healing*, chapter 2. Allender addressed his conviction that evil receives an enormous return on investment through sexual abuse.

[24] James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 166–72.

[25] Romans 5:20 says that as people sinned more, God’s grace became more abundant. Two verses later in Romans 6:1, the question is raised, Should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more of this abundant grace? Romans 6:2 answers it: “Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?” (NLT).

[26] Gabor Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2010), 136.

[27] Maté, *Realm*, 145.

[28] Maté, *Realm*, 142.

[29] Maté, *Realm*, 142.

[30] U2, “Every Breaking Wave,” *Songs of Innocence* (Island, Interscope, 2014).

[31] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Anchor, 2004), appendix.

[32] Applebaum, *Gulag*, 391. While reading Gabor Maté’s reference to this story in *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, Jeffrey was reminded of having read *Gulag* in college.

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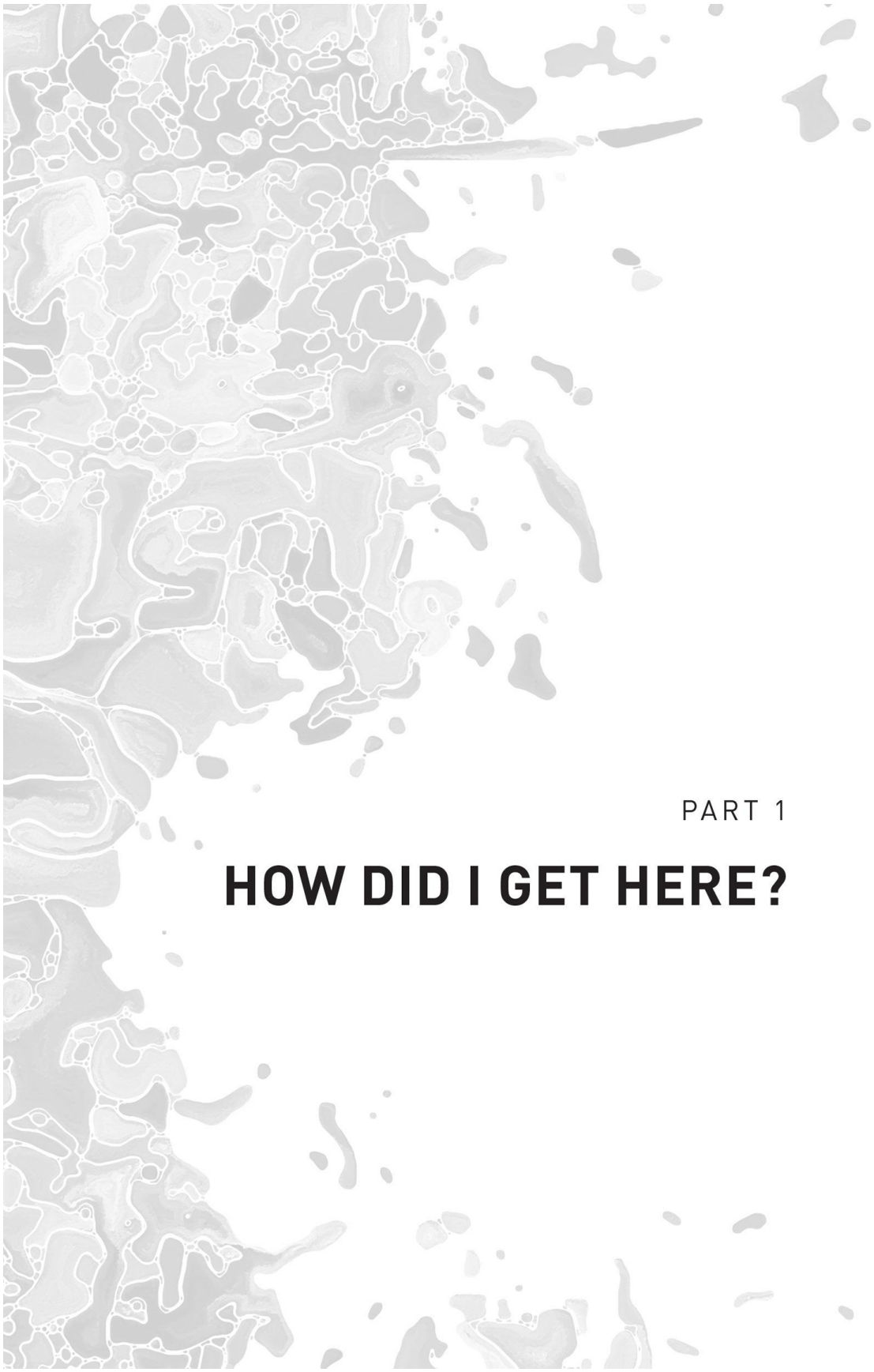

PART 1

HOW DID I GET HERE?

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CHAPTER TWO

SETTING THE COURSE OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

ON A RAINY DAY IN MARCH, a client named Lindsay entered my office, sat down, and said, “In all honesty, I don’t feel as if I should even be in therapy. I should be able to get over my need for porn, but I’m here so that I can find out what is wrong with me.” A week prior to her first appointment, Lindsay asked for her boyfriend’s help to get rid of a virus her computer developed. Her boyfriend tried to isolate the problem and looked into her Internet history. He was shocked to find a massive amount of pornography. When he asked Lindsay about the porn on her computer, she had a mild panic attack and eventually told him she had been struggling with pornography since middle school. Lindsay had always wanted to get help but had felt as though pornography were such a man’s issue. As a woman, she felt uniquely ashamed. She was not aware that one survey found that one in three women watches porn at least once a week.[33] Another study found that 56 percent of women twenty-five years old and younger and 27 percent of women older than twenty-five years old seek out porn.[34]

Whether it is pornography, buying sex, extramarital affairs, or promiscuity, your unwanted behavior has likely left you with a sentiment similar to Lindsay’s. You should have been able to fix the issue by now, and if you can’t, you assume there is something deeply flawed in you. This is the language of self-hatred. What I’d like you to consider is that your contempt for your failure is the very thing that blinds you from seeing the factors that set you on an inevitable trajectory toward unwanted sexual behavior.

I want to be clear that your stance toward what we will travel through in part 1 may be one of resistance. I have never met a client who at some level has not minimized the role their family and community of origin played in the development of their behavior. After I had given a lecture to men in Seattle who had been arrested for soliciting women in prostitution and explained the role their families of origin had played, one man said, "I hear what you are saying, but my parents were great people and have never really disappointed me." He then went on, in the same breath, to say that his father left his mother for another woman and that his mom now asks him to take her to all her doctor appointments and church meetings. "She always tells me it's great that I am still single, so that I can be available to spend so much time with her. I am glad I can love her so well. What I am trying to figure out, though, is why I always need to have a prostitute in my car after I get done spending time with my mom." It should be clear at some level that this man has known harm and that the role he is being asked to play for his mother since the breakdown of his parents' marriage is contributing to his acting out. The choice of unwanted sexual behavior is never accidental. There is always a reason. Your path to freedom from unwanted sexual behavior begins with finding the unique reasons behind yours.

The vast majority of men and women I've worked with tend to condemn themselves for their initial involvement with unwanted sexual behavior. This is like indicting yourself for a cancer diagnosis when you grew up next to a leaking nuclear waste facility. We tend to blame ourselves rather than study the conditions and relationships that most inform our sexual struggles. I am asking you to consider the possibility that your sexual struggle is not random. Could there be dynamics in your family, community, and culture that contributed to your contamination? Jesus says that unless you leave your family—your mother, your father—you cannot follow him. We cannot walk with Jesus into healing if we remain loyal to protecting the people and communities that most contributed to our harm.

As we proceed, I ask that you be attentive to what you are feeling. Where do you feel uneasy? When do you feel disloyal to your family? When do you feel self-contempt? When do you feel the need to universalize your struggle? Where are you deeply curious? This section is not about locating blame in others; it is about pondering the ways that the harm of others has influenced you toward behavior that has cornered you with shame.

Before we address the specific family systems and childhood events that drive unwanted sexual behavior for adults, let's briefly explore three central tenets that will frame our discussion:

1. We are born with dignity.
2. Honor and honesty (not blaming or minimizing) both must be addressed within our family systems.
3. Our sexual brokenness is not random.

We Are Born with Dignity

The word *sex* is taken from the Latin word *secare*, which means to sever, to amputate, or to disconnect from the whole. A major dimension of our relational and sexual lives, then, is the awareness of how severed we are from one another and the way we go about reconnecting.[35] Therefore, sexuality is much more comprehensive than what we choose to do with our genitals or wedding rings. God designed us with the ability to develop a sense of self (identity) and establish joyful and meaningful connection with others (relationships). Sexuality will flourish in your life to the degree to which you develop your identity and build meaningful relationships with those around you. Identity and relationships interanimate each other: The more you know yourself, the more intimate connection you can have with others, and the more connected you are to others, the more you will discover who you truly are.

Our earliest life lessons are *secare* experiences. We are born so dependent on relationships that our heartbeats and body temperatures are regulated in reference to our caregivers. But we are also born able to increasingly self-soothe. Researchers found that when parents were taught to encourage their infants to self-soothe (putting them down awake and waiting a few minutes to respond to their distress), their infants slept longer and woke up less.[36]

Early one morning, I awoke to my son crying. Knowing he was sufficiently fed and had been sleeping through the night for months, I was surprised to hear his sobbing. I stumbled out of bed and walked across the cold floors to his room. I greeted him gently and checked for the evidence of wet or soiled clothing. Nothing. "Up," he said as clearly as any twenty-month-old could muster. I told him it was still very early and he needed to go back to sleep. "Up," he said again, with greater gusto. I picked him up, and he immediately wrapped his little strong arms around my neck and pulled his body close. I held him for a few moments and sang his favorite song. He interrupted my tone-deaf singing with an abrupt "No. Down!" Again I was surprised. He had rejected me for many things, but never for my singing. "You want to go back to your crib?" I replied. "Yes. Down," he said as his body reached for the crib. I lowered him back down, and he immediately turned over to his stomach to fall asleep.

My son's early-morning crying was an expression of his experience of *secare*. He woke up in distress and cried out with a desire to be reconnected with those who love him. He knew at a primal level what his needs were, and once he was reconnected with love, he was able to calm himself and choose rest. In this respect, our sexuality is about how we express our desire to know and be known in all the fear and beauty of what it means to be human.

It is vital for us to address our sexual brokenness from a standpoint of the dignity of self and the dignity of our longing for connection. No person, no matter how troubled or vile, can ever escape the reality of being made to grow in maturity and simultaneously receive care, gentleness, and rest in

the context of relationships. This is just as true for an infant as it is for a man when he leaves a hotel room after buying sex or watching pornography.

In the book of Genesis, God creates the world and looks out over all that has been made and calls it “good” (1:31). The one thing, however, that is not good? Adam’s being alone. In Genesis 2:20, Adam names all the livestock, the birds in the sky, and the wild animals, and you have to guess he observes the animals engaging in some serious mating rituals. You can almost see Adam scratching his head and asking God, “Well, what about me? Is that type of mating behavior for only the animals? God, do you realize there is no one suitable for me?”[37] It is a hilarious verse. God sees Adam’s aloneness and maybe even his befuddlement and begins his crowning act of creation: the formation of Eve.

Adam’s aloneness is rescued through the creation and presence of Eve. She is formed not to serve Adam in the traditional sense but to partner with him in cultivating (ruling and subduing) the goodness of earth. Sexuality allows us to turn away from the constant demands of life and turn toward relationships in order to feel less severed, less amputated, and less disconnected in our fragmented world. But sexuality is never complete if it remains inwardly focused. Sexuality turns outward, too, cultivating the world around us with the unique identities God has bestowed within us.

As we journey through life, we inevitably undergo formative experiences of disconnection from those who were most intended to bring us into wholeness. Cruelty, abandonment, and divorce divide us from our parents. Bullying, abuse, and humiliation divide us from our peers. It is in the aftermath of these stories that we live as exiles “east of Eden.”[38] We wander about in search of home but settle for a narcissistic identity reflected back to us from the amount of sex, power, and money we are able to obtain. Sexual brokenness is not a life sentence; it is an invitation to heal our wounds and learn who we want to become.

Honor and Honesty Must Be Addressed

Abraham is the patriarch of many of the major faiths throughout the world. He is revered for his personal faith and obedience to go to the land God was calling him to. What we rarely mention, however, is that Scripture also tells us that our patriarch trafficked his wife, agreed to impregnating a teenage slave named Hagar (whom we discussed in the introduction), and then turned out to be a real bona fide coward when his barren wife and pregnant slave started fighting. The honesty of Scripture is shocking. Scripture writers honored Abraham but were equally honest about his shortcomings. [39]

Many families and faith communities have embraced the lie that if we are honest, we could not truly honor, and if we honored someone, it would certainly come at the cost of honesty. When given the choice between honesty and honor, I find that most of my clients are naturally bent, to some degree, to be dishonest about what they have experienced in their families. They favor a type of pseudo-honor and present a rosier picture to themselves and others. They may do so out of virtue, but more often than not, they do so because they fear what would happen to them if they disclosed the truth about their families or communities.

One client, Christy, told me that disclosing the sexual abuse she suffered from her father felt like the most dishonoring thing she had ever done in her life, even more dishonoring than cheating on her spouse. She remarked, “If my family knew I was talking about my dad’s abuse and if he actually had to address it, our whole family would fall apart. My mom would leave him, and then what would happen to my dad? I think he would be suicidal. The family functions so much better if I just live a lie.” As you can see, honor and honesty are greatly at odds here.

If you are prone to separate honor and honesty, it is worth pondering how this division between the two came to be. A couple of questions you might want to consider: When did you learn to keep honesty and honor separated? Who taught you that it would be better to honor someone than to tell the truth with kindness and strength? Who taught you that it would be better to tell someone a brazen lie than to bring truth with deep respect for

the other? What would happen to a family Thanksgiving dinner if you spoke with both honesty and honor? A genuine mark of maturity is the ability to hold two simultaneous truths together at the same time.

The writers of Scripture recognized that honesty and honor should never be separated. In other words, honor and honesty are intended to be married, so far as to say there was a private ceremony that brought them into a covenant together. Until you understand that honor and honesty are two sides of the same coin, you will likely be inclined to separate them.

What I have found in my story and with hundreds of men and women is that our desire to honor others is often a smoke screen that keeps us from entering heartache. It is a brilliant and tragic maneuver we have all learned to make. We swerve to protect others so that we do not have to face the implications of what their harm has brought. What if all this were not so? What if you could live where the streams of honesty and honor could converge? May you enter your story with honor *and* honesty.

Sexual Brokenness Is Not Random

If you wanted to understand why men from Somalia became notorious for hijacking and terrorizing ships, you would need to study the conditions that set up this behavior. It's easy to say they "shouldn't" be doing that, but it is another thing to consider the why behind their piracy.

The reality is that Somalian pirates used to be fishermen—that is, until foreign fishing vessels stole their fish. The United Nations estimated that almost $300 million worth of seafood was stolen each year from their coastline.[40] If you combine this theft with a country oppressed by violent warlords, what would you expect these men to do in order to survive? Their pirate behavior is not random; it reveals the wounds of the past and highlights the present problems that need to be transformed. We look to the past not to find excuses for reprehensible behavior but because narrative holds the key to unlocking destructive patterns and implementing all future change.

I have paid close attention to how men become seduced and entangled in lives of sexual addiction and struggle. I have found a number of thematic predecessors that mark the lives of my clients long before their sexual behavior leads them into lives of crisis. One of the most difficult things about working with people is that we are more comfortable talking about how screwed up we are than carefully studying the why behind our unwanted sexual behavior. This will require us to survey landscapes that many of us hold as sacred, if not off limits: family and community.

Over the next few chapters, we will explore five key childhood drivers of unwanted sexual behavior: rigid and/or disengaged family systems, abandonment, parents who were emotionally enmeshed with their children, a history of trauma, and sexual abuse (both overt and subtle forms of it). Although these five key drivers may not immediately resonate, I encourage you to read each of them, as they are more widespread than you may have originally thought.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Do you find yourself bent more toward honor or honesty with your family? If you are bent more toward honor, what did you experience that you feel a need to be dishonest about?
- At this point in your journey, what past stories or present dynamics do you think most influence your involvement in unwanted sexual behavior?

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[33] WITW Staff, “Study Finds That 1 Out of 3 Women Watch Porn at Least Once a Week,” Women in the World, October 22, 2015, https://womenintheworld.com/2015/10/22/study-finds-that-1-out-of-3-women-watch-porn-at-least-once-a-week/.

[34] David Kinnaman, “The Porn Phenomenon,” *Barna* (blog), February 5, 2016, https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/. This article provides an overview of Barna’s 2016 report, *The Porn Phenomenon: the Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age*. Studies conducted for this report revealed that 33 percent of females ages thirteen to twenty-four and 12 percent ages twenty-five and older admitted to seeking out porn daily, weekly, or monthly.

[35] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 193.

[36] Jodi A. Mindell et al., “Behavioral Treatment of Bedtime Problems and Night Wakings in Infants and Young Children,” *Sleep* 29, no. 10 (2006): 1263–1276.

[37] I do not have a source for this interpretation, but if not my own, it could be attributed to Dr. Dan Allender or Dr. Tim Keller.

[38] In addition to John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (New York: Bantam, 1952), this is a reference to the “land of Nod” (Genesis 4:16), where Cain was exiled by God after he murdered his brother Abel (see verse 8). *Nod* is the Hebrew root word for “to wander.”

[39] I am indebted to Dr. Dan Allender for this insight. For more information on how to practice honor and honesty in your life, check out the Allender Center’s story workshop: https://theallendercenter.org/offerings/workshops/the-story-workshop/.

[40] Ishaan Tharoor, “How Somalia’s Fishermen Became Pirates,” *Time*, April 18, 2009, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1892376,00.html.

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CHAPTER THREE

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY SYSTEMS

THE FIRST KEY CHILDHOOD DRIVER of unwanted sexual behavior is having a family system that was characterized as rigid and/or disengaged. Dr. Patrick Carnes, one of the leading researchers on sexual compulsivity, found that 77 percent of those who struggle with sexual addiction report coming from a rigid family, and 87 percent report coming from a disengaged family.[41]

Rigidity: When Rules Are Weapons

A rigid home has excessive regulation. There is often one parent who rules the family with an iron fist. The parent demands compliance, but he or she is compliant to no one. As a child, you may be under considerable surveillance, all the while having a front-row seat to your parent's glaring hypocrisy.

Rigid family systems see everything in black and white. Even when an issue has immense complexity, the parent with the power will make a dogmatic decision to reinforce his or her control. This dogma could be in regards to behavior such as dating, curfew, what television shows or movies a child is able to watch, or requiring the house to be perfectly clean before a guest arrives. Children in these homes learn that rules are not like barriers around the Grand Canyon to keep people from dying; they are more like scarlet letters given to shame others into compliance. To survive, you comply or depart, often in dramatic fashion.

Growing up in a rigid family system begets children who are often split off as either good or bad. Whether you become the golden child or the black sheep, your life reveals the pathology of a rigid family system. The black sheep of the family may look out of control, but if you listen to what drives his behavior and defiance, you will hear an honesty that rivals the truth-telling capacity of a biblical prophet. He refuses to live in a family that demands unquestioned loyalty to the tyranny of rigidity and, sadly, often squanders much of his life in defiant protest long after he leaves home. The consequences of his actions will certainly need to be engaged, but the recovery process of the black sheep is far easier than the golden child's journey out of a life of self-righteousness and hiding.

One client, whose family role was to be the scapegoat, recently disclosed to her family the difficult news that she had been involved in multiple affairs over the course of her marriage. Later that spring, at a family reunion, my client's father gave a speech to more than twenty family members about how grateful he was that he and his wife had remained faithful for five decades and how much of a blessing it was for them to know that "some" of their children had followed in their footsteps. My client, although hurt by her father's remark, was able to see that this shaming was a consistent tactic her family used to keep themselves in a position of power and authority over her. What no one named was that her father was emotionally abusive to his family and spent the majority of those fifty years on business trips.

The golden child's strategy is to deny the truth of a rigid family through presenting a perfect image to the world at the cost of his soul. He learns that compliance and competence allow him to maneuver as a saint within the rigid borders of the family. Although he may be struggling with depression or pornography, he correctly discerns that revealing these struggles would be far too costly. He defaults to presenting a perfect public self and elects to keep the painful and troubled dimensions of who he is beyond detection.

The need a child feels to be “good” rather than honest creates a relational template that has ruined many marriages. How often has a spouse appeared kind, hardworking, even sacrificial, but in private indulged in unwanted sexual behavior? The issue may be hypocrisy, but far more often, the person is recreating the original dynamics from childhood. The script he received was to present a tame and sacrificial version of himself to the world. Tragically, his sexual desire and personal opinions remain buried. Devoid of care, his thoughts and emotions were unable to mature.

Rigid family systems shape the particular sexual fantasies and behavior men and women pursue. Fifty-three percent of my survey respondents said their fathers were too strict and focused on rules. Men who grew up with strict fathers were more likely to develop fantasies of power over women in the type of pornography they pursued. This included women who were younger, with smaller body types, and women from another race who appeared, to them, submissive. The implication was that sons who were powered over tended to grow up to be men who desired power over others.

About 50 percent of my survey respondents said their mothers were too strict and focused on rules. Women who wanted to be used or have harm done to them in their sexual fantasies were two and a half times more likely to have had a strict mother. The implication was that daughters who were powered over tended to grow up to be women who pursued fantasies where harm and cruelty were reinforced. In men and women alike, family systems of rigidity set children up to be adults who wanted to either reverse or repeat the power dynamics of their youth.

Anger escalates in rigid family systems. Rigidity sets the stage for anger because it consistently exposes us to the hypocrisy of the ones in the family, community, or workplace who have power. Like the client who was shamed by her dad during the family reunion speech, those who are scapegoated develop a highly tuned radar for the double standards of others. My client struggled immensely with her parents’ marriage because she knew that her father was far more alive around his secretary and used work to consistently escape from his needy wife of five decades. My client later

remarked to me, “Never in a million years would my dad own up to his departure from our family. Instead, he gets to be perceived as the faithful husband. He tells a story he needs to believe.” Bottom line: Anger escalates in any system that does not tell the truth.

Rigidity puts you in a bind. On one hand, you are powerless, and on the other hand, you have so much evidence against your dysfunctional family system. If you speak, you will be exiled and orphaned. If you don’t speak, you reinforce how powerless you feel. When you are powerless, you should be on high alert for anger. Feeling anger at the hypocrisy of others is like a tropical storm entering the warm waters of the Caribbean. A hurricane is going to ensue, and you will wreck either your family, your own life, or both. Pornography appeals to powerless people precisely because it gives their anger an arena to be on full display. In reality you may feel powerless, but in the world of the Internet, you can have whatever you want. This is the razor edge of recovery: Your unwanted sexual behavior must change, but it also needs to be honored as a symbol of all the unprocessed anger of living in a dysfunctional system.

Disengagement: When Care Is Neglected

Another hallmark of homes of children who grow up to struggle with unwanted sexual behavior is disengagement. Disengagement occurs when parents choose to withdraw from their children’s lives. In my research, 63 percent of the respondents wanted more of their fathers’ involvement, and 39 percent wanted more of their mothers’ involvement. Examples of disengagement are parents’ workaholism, choosing to avoid necessary conversations related to themes every child needs to learn about (self-care, nutrition, sex), or choosing to ignore attunement (being aware and receptive) with children when they are experiencing anxiety, sorrow, or anger. When this happens, children grow up with a profound sense that they are not prepared for the world they are encountering and roam through life never fully knowing they are loved and delighted in. These children learn that life is not found within a family but outside one. In adulthood, this

belief remains operative. The adults may be in marriages or committed relationships, but they can never trust them to offer what their hearts so desperately desire.

Children who have known disengagement may have some experiences of connection with their parents, but only if they are making good grades, taking their vitamins, and offering some type of needed support to parents. Their compliance and denial of emotional needs allow the family system to continue without the need for change. The moment these children have opinions or reveal unpleasant emotions, conflict ensues and the perks of their previous roles evaporate. To survive, disengaged children may grow up to become successful professionals who detach from their families, as their parents before them did. Or they roam through life like nomads, trying to find leaders or lifestyles they can tether themselves to.

Children who were ignored by their parents are incredibly susceptible to various forms of sexual abuse, including the introduction to pornography. This does not mean your parents were desiring you to be abused, but it does mean they made an intentional, maybe even necessary, decision to direct their focus to someone or something else. We will explore this in much greater detail in chapter 7, but when children were neglected by their parents, the innate desire they have to be enjoyed and pursued was picked up by their abuser or their peers. Children who wanted more involvement from their mothers and fathers were more likely to have adults touch them inappropriately and were more likely to be asked to act out something they saw in pornography. A parent's passivity is not neutral; the neglect sets the stage for harm.

Consider the following for women respondents in my survey:

- The risk *tripled* of being introduced to pornography by someone older for those who wanted, to a very great extent, more of their mothers' involvement.

- The risk *quadrupled* of being asked to sexually stimulate someone during or after pornography for those who wanted, to a very great extent, more of their mothers' involvement in childhood.
- Women were two times more likely to be introduced to pornography by someone older when they, to a very great extent, wanted more involvement from their fathers.
- The risk of being introduced to pornography by someone older increased from 9 percent to 38 percent when they reported that their fathers showed a very great deal more interest in the respondents' siblings.

Disengagement Intensifies Lust

Lust blooms in the soil of disengagement. Disengagement plants the seeds of lust because the child, who is made to experience tenderness and delight, recognizes that familial love is not something that can be depended on. This is often because the parents have become more preoccupied with work, showing affection to another sibling, or their own distractions or addictions. If you recall Jeffrey's story from the introduction, he recognized that his mother would be gone often, working to put food on the table. Jeffrey concluded that home would not be a place for his needs or desires to be met. He would need to cruise in order to find the eyes to attach to. Such is the case with so many men and women who exist within disengaged families. They are faced with the choice to live with hunger inside the home or search outside it to ensure connection and sustenance. The madness that most people find, however, is that the solutions we pursue apart from God and community leave us more alone than we were at the beginning. Here, we double down our bet on lust and end up bankrupt.

Olivia, a nurse, came into a session after having a disturbing encounter with a patient's family that reminded her of her childhood. A teenage boy arrived in the emergency room with his friends after breaking his arm. When he got to the hospital, the staff asked him about notifying his parents. The boy gave permission to call his mom but not to call his dad, who was

having a “really busy day.” Olivia remarked that she felt enraged at the boy’s dad and it did not occur to her until coming into therapy as to why. “My mom always stressed the importance of making good grades and not fighting around my dad because he worked so hard during the week and needed to have a ‘rest haven’ when he got home. She was so rigid about this. I learned to just keep all the other stuff that was happening in my life far from their ears, even if it was about wanting my dad to show up to my events at school. My family functioned better when I didn’t ask for anything or give them anything to worry about. But then it came out that my dad was having an affair and would schedule these meet-ups with the woman at the same time as my events at school because he knew my mom would be gone then. I remember feeling so stupid that I wanted my dad involved in my life, when he was filled with so much deceit.”

Olivia’s story highlights an exposure to a very rigid and disengaged family system. You may have experienced something very similar to Olivia’s story or have had a life marked by even higher levels of rigidity or disengagement. The point I want to make here is that your anger and your lust, which have grown in these types of family or communal systems, must go somewhere. Unwanted sexual behavior is one of the most common avenues we pursue to reverse or reinforce the negative experiences we endured in childhood. Our goal is to study and grieve the conditions that led to our sexual brokeness, thereby reducing their power over our present.

Study Your Anger and Lust

Anger and lust are easy to scapegoat due to the harm they produce in our lives. The more generative approach, however, is curiosity. At this point in your journey, lust exposes your demand to be filled. But if you listen to your lust, it will reveal a holy desire for belonging. Anger now exposes your demand for control. But if you study your anger, you will find that it produces a remarkable radar for injustice. The journey out of unwanted

sexual behavior begins by recognizing that your struggles may be the most honest dimension of your life. Your sexual struggles reveal your wounds, but they also reveal the trafficked longings of your heart.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Would you characterize your family as either rigid or disengaged (or both)? If so, what examples do you recall?
- Recall a memory that represents the dysfunction in your family, perhaps at a family dinner table. Attempt to see the scene as if you are watching a movie before you formulize any thoughts. Do you see cruelty or rigidity on family members' faces? What do you think they wanted you to feel in their presence?
- If your parents were disengaged, why do you think they preferred to ignore or remove themselves from the family? How did they let you know they were emotionally or physically leaving?

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[41] Patrick J. Carnes, PhD, *The Making of a Sex Addict*, 1998, https://www.iitap.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ARTICLE_The-Making-of-a-Sex-Addict_PCarnes.pdf.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ABANDONMENT

A Life in Exile

CHILDREN WHO GREW UP in rigid or disengaged homes often end up feeling abandoned. They realize that the delight and respect they desire will not come to pass. To survive, they must develop resiliency and find surrogate sources of comfort, or they will die. Abandonment can be experienced in overt ways, such as when a parent leaves the family in the midst of immense marital conflict. But it can also occur in subtle ways, such as when you recognize that one of your siblings has more of the affection and delight of your parents than you will ever receive.

My research found that 47 percent of men and women did not have someone they could talk to when something difficult happened in their childhood. It is not that these children did not have parents; it is that children discern whether or not they can feel safe bringing the difficulties of life to their parents. Think about it like this: If you are bullied at school, why share this with your family when they've consistently avoided offering genuine empathy in your own home? If your parents are far more interested in their careers, whom do you talk to when a neighbor, an older student, or an uncle begins to sexually abuse you? And when you find yourself curious about sex, how much of a fool would you need to be to bring these questions to your parents when you intuitively know you will be silenced or make your parents incredibly uncomfortable?

In their book *Rising to Power*, Ron Carucci and Eric Hansen made a fascinating observation: The abdication of power does more damage in an organization than coercive leadership. Leaders certainly wreck

organizations when they are forceful, but they are most destructive when they fail to fully own the power of their positions.[42] The same is true for parents who abdicate their power in the lives of their children. Respondents in my research reported considerable disengagement from their parents. One of the most glaring areas in which parents were remiss was in talking to their children about sex.

There is an unspoken rule in many homes and churches that sex is not to be talked about unless the conversation serves to put the fear of God in children about their participation in sex before marriage. Talking about sex solely in the context of prohibition, however, sets a child up for madness. A child needs to hear sex talked about in a way that honors the natural, God-given changes and desires that will accompany them from childhood to adulthood. An overemphasis on negative instruction about sex has the capacity to lead a child to associate sex with silence and shame. By the time the child reaches adulthood, this association becomes ingrained and continues to operate.

Parents Are Either Silent or Inadequate

In my research study, men and women who struggled with unwanted sexual behavior had parents who were either silent or unhelpful about conversations related to sex.

PARENTS DON'T TEND TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS WITH THEIR KIDS ABOUT SEX. WHEN THEY DID, THEY WERE NOT HELPFUL.

50%
did not have their mothers talk to them about sex at all
60%
did not have their fathers talk to them about sex at all
8%
had genuinely helpful conversations with their mothers about sex
5%
had genuinely helpful conversations with their fathers about sex

Parents who did not engage with their children in conversations about sex may not have done so for a variety of reasons. Sadly, they allowed the most vulnerable and beautiful dimension of their children's lives to be shaped by the media, the porn industry, or porn-saturated peers. When your parents abdicated their power to frame healthy and normative sex education for you, they were, intentionally or not, creating a world of silence and intrigue. Where parents and faith communities will not educate, pornography will.

Madison lived in the shadow of her sister's athleticism. When Madison was ten, she was kicking a soccer ball around with her father. Moments into playing, she became mesmerized by the beauty of a hawk's flight above. Her father grew irritated and angry. The next time she looked up, he blasted the ball as high as he could toward the hawk. He walked away and said to Madison, "Your sister is an athlete. Sports just aren't your thing, so enjoy your freaking birds. I really hope it gets you somewhere in life." Madison found herself longing to be a hawk that could soar high above her father's petty rage. She attempted to tell her mom about her father's cruelty later that afternoon, but the response was impervious: "Your dad is just trying to encourage you. You don't need to make it seem as if he is a monster."

From that day forward, Madison and her father avoided real emotional engagement with one another. The family basement was devoted to her father's collegiate accomplishments and her sister's growing collection of athletic awards. Madison felt abandoned by both her parents. She remembered the horror and confusion of having her first menstrual cycle and having no idea what was happening to her body. She was crying when she brought the news to her mom, only to have her reply, "Madison, stop being so dramatic. You will be fine. You are a woman now. I'll get you a pad."

As Madison's childhood continued, she found there was far more life to be found walking through the woods and looking under rocks for salamanders at the creek. She would go on to earn a PhD in biology, but no one from her family attended the graduation. Seeing her classmates surrounded by their families filled her with tremendous heartache. Her family chose her sister's NCAA tournament game instead. Madison felt sick walking back to her car and threw her diploma into the back seat. She wept at how lonely and unwanted she felt. She waited more than a week to hear from her father. It was a short conversation that ended with her father reminding her of how he knew athletics were not her thing. He closed the conversation by saying, "Aren't you glad I told you to enjoy the birds? You made something of yourself. You should be proud."

Three years into her career, Madison was depressed and found herself caught in a web of sexual struggles. At our first appointment, I asked Madison to tell me about herself. She said, "Who am I? I am a worthless woman who is addicted to porn. I've never been able to connect with anyone my whole life, and my whole career field just makes me the oddball anywhere I go. I hate myself for everything I am not. I've started using hookup apps when I am drunk, and I'm putting myself in situations I swore I would never be in. It just reinforces that no one wants anything to do with me except to use me. Now I am a damaged scientist. Who would ever want me?"

Madison was not a worthless woman because she viewed pornography or used hookup apps. Rather, she felt worthless and therefore was drawn to pornography, a behavior that, for her, would confirm this belief. She knew that her inferior athleticism would lead to a growing distance from her dad because she could not reflect the image her father wanted in a daughter. Her natural, beautiful curiosity for discovery was seen as something second class. Madison's life shows us something profound: When we condemn our God-given desire to be loved and accepted, we should be on high alert for the ways we will trash this longing through shameful behavior.

Tom began looking at pornography in a very conservative and emotionally distant evangelical home. His pornography of choice was women on their knees engaging in oral sex. He imagined himself standing there as the male actor in the film. In his fantasy, he was a desirable and powerful man, able to influence a woman to acquiesce before him. He worked with a therapist for pornography addiction recovery for more than a year. Tom was encouraged to buy software to block porn and was told his pornography struggle was likely his lustful attempt to look for love in the wrong place. None of the particulars associated with his pornography searches were explored.

For far too many like Tom, this is the extent to which their struggles will be engaged. This is a tragedy. When pornography is addressed only through the lens of lust, when the stories that set up pornography use are evaded, an anemic treatment plan will follow. Sexual cessation will be prescribed, encouragement to tell his or her spouse will be given, and the client will be asked to join an accountability group.

Pornography searches expose lust, but far more they reveal the dimensions of our lives that await love. In my work with Tom, he began to name the desire for women to be subservient to him. His fantasies had begun with *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models and escalated to the need to see women be increasingly violated in their subservience.

In naming the truth of his searches, his curiosity increased. Tom was thirteen when his parents got divorced, largely due to his father's failed business endeavors. The family experienced consistent financial anxiety, leading to intense conflict in his parents' marriage. His mother was wrecked by the divorce, and sensing her plight, Tom concluded that he needed to be the man of the house.

Tom heard sermons from his church organizations that encouraged him to be a strong leader, to be a godly man, and to put God first above all things. He aspired to this, but in his quieter, human moments, he felt burdened under this enormous weight. He said to me, "I felt so much pressure. I needed to be really caring for my mom because my dad left us, be a godly example for my siblings, lead my peers to the Lord, do well in school to get a scholarship, and somehow, on top of all that, serve God alone. I was angry at how much was expected of me."

It was during this time that Tom was first introduced to pornography. With each passing month, Tom's pornography use escalated. He eventually found a video that pierced him: a young college student giving oral sex. Tom would later remark, "With porn, I am served. In real life, it's as if I am the one on my knees, subservient to what everyone is requiring of me. I got tired of being the only one who has to sacrifice his life. When my dad left my mom, no one asked me how I was doing. They just told me I needed to be there for my mom and siblings. I am recognizing what I am searching for—even in a woman's body type—is someone smaller, with fewer needs than I have."

As Tom named the abandonment of his dad and faith communities, he had to choose what sort of life he was going to make for himself. He knew the patterns of abandonment all too well and found himself recreating these themes throughout his present life. The dilemma was that pornography use would persist until Tom would choose to bring his needs and emotions to the crucible of the present. Therapy invited him to see what it would mean to bring his anger to reality—toward the people and themes that contributed to his exile—rather than to the world of pornography.

Anger within our abandonment is important because it alerts us to the reality that something around or within us is not as it should be. Tom's anger was trying to get his attention and tell him that serving the needs of others at the cost of his own was not sustainable. He learned to say no to requests that he knew would only further exhaust him. He also learned to ask others for what he needed and encouraged them to do the difficult work of transformation rather than venting to him about their problems. The more he brought the fullness of his needs and anger to the present, the less pornography appealed to him.

The Data of Sexual Brokenness

Abandonment, such as what Madison and Tom suffered, leads to a tendency to develop a calloused outlook on life. You may act out sexually, but you think, *It really doesn't matter to anyone*. You may be in a difficult marriage, but you know you chose a partner you didn't have high hopes for to begin with. Abandonment is dangerous because it tempts us to lose faith (or never find it) in the most foundational levels of what it means to be human: individual maturity and a loving bond with others.

The type of sexual behavior we pursue is a direct reflection of how highly or poorly we think of ourselves. When abandoned, we are convinced that we were left because of the deep flaws that exist within us. This shame-based identity is then woven into all our choices and eventually becomes the lens through which we see our lives. Our careers, spouses or lack thereof, and sexual behavior all become additional data that reinforces how troubled we are.

I have come to understand that people make bad decisions not because of the potential for pleasure but to add additional evidence to their self-judgment. Healing involves making conscious decisions about the data of sexual brokenness in one's life. Your behavior can be an invitation to become an adult and heal the pain driving your decisions, or it will

inevitably be irrefutable evidence that proves how pathetic you have become. To write a new sexual story for yourself, something must shift in your commitment to hiding the anxiety, shame, and anger in your life.

FOR REFLECTION:

- If you experienced abandonment, at what age did this get solidified? What was going on in your life or family at the time?
- What do you think your parent(s) wanted you to feel in leaving you? See the scene(s), allowing yourself to experience any emotion that might be present.
- Can you recall a time when you pursued unwanted sexual behavior when you were feeling estranged from others? What were the circumstances?

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[42] Ron A. Carucci and Eric C. Hansen, “Executive Power: Perversions, Abuses, and the Greater Good,” chap. 5 in *Rising to Power: The Journey of Exceptional Executives* (Austin, TX: Greenleaf, 2014).

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CHAPTER FIVE

TRIANGULATION

When You're Married to Your Parent

ALEX ENTERED THERAPY BECAUSE he had a difficult time sustaining connection with women, which he cited as one of his primary reasons for persistent pornography use. Alex remarked, "Porn is way easier. There is nothing required of me. It's the one place where I can get pleasure without any requirements." I asked him if he had any sense of why connecting with women was so difficult and how long this difficulty had existed in his life. He responded by telling me about a television show he watched where a proclaimed dog whisperer was working with a dog that seemed to hate human connection and instead preferred to be left alone. The trainer, like a good therapist, asked the owner about the dog's past. The owner told him that the dog came from a home with small kids where the animal was consistently overstimulated with hugs and invasive petting. The trainer summed it up by saying that the dog had experienced "too much uncomfortable comfort."

My client deeply identified with this dog and spoke about his mother's need for significant physical and emotional contact. Alex's mother requested hugs when she felt depressed or needed a pick-me-up on long days. The worst part of all was how invaded he felt by his mom when it came to his dating life. She wanted to know the details of his physical intimacy and how he was managing his lust. "It felt as if we were playing a game. She always wanted to know what was going on with my heart, and

when I didn't tell her all the details, she would make me bear her depression. When I finally decided I wasn't going to tell her anything again, it was as if I had cheated on her."

Alex lived with an acute sense of guilt in his relationship with his mother. He wondered what was wrong with him that he did not want to open up to his mom, who on the surface cared for him. "I've talked to so many guys who never had parents interested in their lives. I did, and I couldn't stand it. There are days where I wish I could just get over myself and accept her love."

On the other hand, he knew that his mom was a consuming presence. Each hug he gave and every portion of his heart he offered were never enough. She would always want more. "My mom had a really hard time when I went off to college. My presence was what fueled her, and now that I was gone, she was stranded hundreds of miles away. I think this is one of the reasons I've never been able to date anyone for more than six months. My 'low fuel' light always comes on, and I don't have anything left to give."

Triangulation, or emotional enmeshment, occurs when there is a breakdown in a marriage relationship and a child is brought in to fill the emotional emptiness. My research showed that 45 percent of respondents had their mothers confide in them about their frustrations with their lives and spouses, and 24 percent had their fathers confide in them about their frustrations with their lives and spouses. As you can see, the classic example of triangulation is a mother confiding in her children when the father abdicates his emotional responsibility to his wife. In the growing marital distance, the wife brings her emotional life—its joys and sorrows—to a child instead.

In triangulation, a child is groomed to be the balm for his mother or father, thus developing an identity in reference to the parent's needs. One example of how this played out with men was that 33 percent of men who had fathers confide in them about the difficulties they were having in their lives or marriages went on to search out pornography where women

appeared to have a sense of maturity or power. These men searched the Internet for attractive mother figures, larger body types, bosses, and so on. The chances of pursuing this type of pornography dropped almost in half for men whose fathers did not emotionally enmesh with them.

Triangulation is a form of emotional incest and has profound effects on the development of one's individual and relational self. In marriage, our parents make vows to commit their loyalty, affection, and hearts to their spouses. Children do not make these vows. If you have been triangulated, it is likely your parents did not consider how the heartache and loneliness of their marriage would eventually affect you.

Triangulation Is Idolatry

The primary issue of triangulation is that children become idols for their parents. Pastor and author Tim Keller said,

> The human heart is an "idol factory." . . . [It] takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them. [43]

Parents form their children into idols each time they use their children to seek emotional fulfillment that they do not find in their marriages or friendships. It might be overt, such as a parent referring to her son or daughter as "my world" or "my prince/princess" or in more subtle ways, such as a parent confiding to his child about the burdens he is facing. Whenever triangulation is present, a parent's idolatry is in full effect.

Children who were groomed to be idols for their parents feel that any choice they make, even if healthy, will feel like a form of betrayal. But only through severing the ties of these unhealthy bonds can a new identity form. One client was criticized by his father for wanting to play football. He was

told that he was too small and needed to stay home to help his mom with his younger siblings. Through therapy, he was exploring all the desires he had to give up as a child to stay bonded with his mom. This led to a very intentional pursuit of activities that he thought he could enjoy. He joined a cycling group in Seattle and has lost twenty pounds. He noted that much of this weight had been gained from the guilt he had for going to an out-of-state university. Although cycling has been a very healing dimension, it is not without anxiety: “I am aware that cycling takes up weekends that I could be going to my mom’s or dad’s place. I feel as if I need to rescue them from their loneliness. They really have no lives.”

When a child is triangulated, the relationship with the parent is accompanied by a great deal of ambivalence. On one hand, the child has powerful access to conversations and intimacy that his or her siblings and the other parent are not privy to. The privilege of being your parent’s idol is remarkable and allows you to take unlimited draws of power and delight from the bank of this relationship. The cost of membership, though, is that your parent tends to determine what your life ought to look like. You may agree to their vision of your life for a time, but the moment you want something different, conflict ensues.

Triangulation and Sexual Development

Triangulation affects the sexual development of children. Although emotional enmeshment may never involve a parent touching a child’s genitals, your sexual development is influenced by the emotional burdens you undergo. Alex consistently felt that his mom was using his body to give her body a rush of connection. Another client reported that her mother was often emasculating and flippant around the house. She and her father developed a code word that would let one another know that the mother/spouse was being “crazy.” They would meet up in the garage and get in her father’s car to head out for an afternoon of shopping, movies, or

ice cream. “I really loved our time, but it always seemed as if we were on dates. I knew he adored me far more than he adored my mom. I loved that feeling, but it also made me really uncomfortable around my mom.”

American novelist Pat Conroy’s book *The Prince of Tides* offers a gripping and uncomfortable view of how triangulation is experienced as a child:[44]

> A portion of guilt is standard issue for southern boys; our whole lives are convoluted, egregious apologies to our mothers because our fathers have made such flawed husbands. No boy can endure for long the weight and magnitude of his own mother’s displaced passion. Yet few boys can resist their mothers’ solitary and innocently seductive advances. There is such forbidden sweetness in becoming the chaste and secret lover of the father’s woman, such triumph in becoming the demon rival who receives the unbearably tender love of fragile women in the shadows of the father’s house. There is nothing more erotic on earth than a boy in love with the shape and touch of his mother. It is the most exquisite, most proscribed lust. It is also the most natural and damaging.[45]

Although Conroy’s words may seem hyperbolic to some, this dynamic between mothers and sons, as well as fathers and daughters, is a sad reality, especially in many faith-based homes. For many men I have worked with, there is an unspoken rule that they must be loyal to their mothers up until their wedding days. This will often set them up to offer their lives and emotions for their mothers’ well-being, while the husbands are largely distant, if not cowardly, in their engagement with their spouses. As Conroy noted, the triangulated son knows all too well how flawed of a spouse his father is.

Women, too, are set up for triangulation, and the results are no less damaging. A little girl grows up being called “Daddy’s little girl” or “princess.” It may appear innocent, but this language often becomes grounds for her father’s voyeuristic surveillance on her life. She grows up feeling the tension between becoming her own person and learning that her identity is derived from being a balm to the needs of others. My research showed there was an association between a father’s confiding in his daughter and the strictness or rigidity of her mother. The data seems to suggest that when a father finds more life and connection with his daughter than with his spouse, the wife will respond with anger and rigidity toward their daughter.

Separation Leads to Conflict

A parent who is triangulated with a child does not want independence; the parent wants the child to feed the parent’s emotional emptiness. A triangulated child will often feel a parent’s disapproval when he expresses interest in dating, learning about his body, or differentiating his identity from family norms. A parent recognizes these attempts at differentiation as a threat rather than normal parts of the developmental process. Healthy parents may experience heartfelt tension as their children mature, but far more, they recognize the privilege in helping shape, not control, their child’s development.

To get out alive, a triangulated child will need to find a way to escape this relational maze throughout adolescence. Enter pornography. In this way, he gives in to the requirements of his family and culture but also chooses prodigal behavior that gives a false but satisfactory experience of freedom. This child intuitively knows that his behavior is compromised but concurrently feels entitled to these desires.

If a parent discovers his or her child’s pornography use or premarital sexuality, the parent will use this as an opportunity to reinforce the triangulated family system. The parent’s solution is for the child to have less independence and earn back the trust of the parent through enmeshed

relationship and even accountability. What an adolescent may actually need is for both parents to be present in his life and free him to pursue a type of life that fills him with meaning. When this does not happen, the enmeshed parent will inevitably set up another round of rebellion for the child.

Childhood Triangulation Damages Marriages

Jesus tells us that unless we leave our fathers and mothers, we cannot follow him. Additionally, Scripture is clear that a husband and wife must *leave* their families of origin so they can weave and cleave with one another. One of the reasons many marriages fail or exist in perpetual conflict is that the husband or wife remains exceedingly loyal to his or her parents instead of to his or her spouse. A general rule of thumb is that if there is ongoing conflict with a mother-in-law or father-in-law, the presence of triangulation should be explored.

Childhood triangulation that continues into a marriage is a form of emotional infidelity. If you are a spouse more committed to rescuing your parent, your faithfulness to your own marriage is compromised. Examples of this might include receiving “perfectly timed” communications from your mother or father that leave you ambivalent and anxious. It could be a text about a sibling struggling with his or her faith, a phone call that your dad’s health is not doing well, or an e-mail that finances are really stressful for the family. The unsaid expectation is that you need to step up to resolve this problem and offer care so the peace of the family can be restored.

The other way childhood triangulation affects marriage is when you have separated from your parent but then find yourself incapable of creating an intimate, lasting connection with your spouse. In this example, you find yourself resistant to deep connection, fearing you will be trapped or used all over again. You project onto your spouse that he or she is asking you to play the same enmeshed role your parent did. Once this projection is made, you feel justified,once more, to pursue unwanted sexual behavior. If you’re experiencing this, be on high alert as to how you use your past enmeshment as an excuse for not learning the difficult work of maturity in relationships.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Do you see any evidence of emotional enmeshment or triangulation with one or both of your parents? If so, it is likely your parents knew the role they were asking you to play. Recall a time when this occurred and notice what you see.
- If your mother or father triangulated you, how do you think they felt about the role they asked you to play?
- If you were your parent's favorite, how did that impact your relationship with the other parent or your siblings?

[43] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (Boston: Dutton, 2009), xiv.

[44] See chapter 5 in Dr. Dan Allender's *Healing the Wounded Heart: The Heartache of Sexual Abuse and the Hope of Transformation* for an excellent engagement of Conroy's quote and the topic of covert abuse.

[45] Pat Conroy, *The Prince of Tides: A Novel* (New York: Bantam, 1986), 110.

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CHAPTER SIX

TRAUMA AS SOUL LOSS

WE TEND TO RESERVE THE WORD *trauma* for those who have experienced the horrors of war, a natural disaster, or a particularly cruel event. We think of Vietnam, 9/11, and Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey. Although these examples are certainly traumatic, trauma also occurs in subtle ways. The word *trauma* comes from the Greek word for "wound."

The perilous nature of emotional trauma in our lives is how it evades detection. We become so fixated on stopping our unwanted behavior that we forget to look around for other explanations of its arrival. This chapter is about recognizing how the presence of sexual brokenness reveals portions of your life that have yet to heal. Whereas scars reveal external wounds, unwanted sexual behavior often reveals internal ones.

Trauma is like a master magician when you are struggling with sexual brokenness. You may have thought that your unwanted sexual behavior magically appears, like a rabbit, out of thin air. In reality, the magician had put the rabbit behind his table before you arrived. The magician draws your attention to the hat on the table, and this is all that is needed to distract you from the presence of the rabbit.

For our discussion, there are three features of trauma that should be highlighted. First, as Bessel van der Kolk, a pioneer in the field of trauma, wrote, "We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body."[46] For example, if you were called stupid as a child, the

imprint of the wound may be revealed in your relentless attempts to be competent or the toxic shame you feel when someone realizes you do not know how to do something.

Second, trauma affects not only your mind but also your body. This is why you might hear people say, “I was completely traumatized and couldn’t say anything” or “I was scared stiff after the bang” or “My knees started shaking after I heard that my dad had been hospitalized.”

Third, trauma is a type of soul loss. When the indigenous people of South America and Mesoamerica were colonized by the Portuguese, they borrowed the Portuguese word *susto* to describe what happened to them in trauma: “fright paralysis” and a “soul loss.”[47]

Emotional Abuse as Trauma

James was one of the first clients I worked with. During his therapy, I recognized how a collection of “minor” experiences of emotional and physical abuse throughout his life compounded into trauma. He described a sleepover where his neighborhood friends put cayenne pepper on his lips and fingers after he fell asleep. He woke up disoriented, in pain, and surrounded by cackling laughter. He remembered the ambivalence of the moment: “If I left the sleepover, my friends would have laughed even more. And if I would have called my mom, I would have been a mama’s boy and my mom would never let me leave the house again.”

James felt trapped, and despite having his mouth and eyes on fire, he decided instead to join their laughter. This scene was repeated in similar ways throughout middle school and high school: He would be the object of humiliation and abuse and would choose to laugh rather than become defiant against the perpetrators. There was the time his towel, underwear, and gym bag were thrown out of the locker room for him to have to retrieve in between classes. Another time, he was dared by his classmates to steal candy from a convenience shop, only to have the same students rat him out. In adulthood, when James was a history teacher at a private school, a parent whose son had done poorly in his class saw James drinking at a bar one

night and e-mailed a video of his alcohol consumption to the principal, asking for him to be fired since he was a poor example of what the school represented.

Although there may not have been a single catastrophic form of trauma in James's life, the accumulated experiences of rejection, humiliation, mockery, and scapegoating collectively served the same purpose. By the time he reached adulthood, his body was full of shame and anger for what had been done to him. This was the imprint of trauma.

Trauma Shapes Arousal

Pornography is alluring to most of us, but it is particularly devastating to those suffering with unaddressed trauma. At this point, you may have only understood pornography as a type of erotic content. But as we continue to dig deeper, we will see that many of the themes of pornography often mirror the impact of trauma: the misuse of power, deception, humiliation, and sexual gain. Pornography streams through our eyes and into the crevasses of our trauma.

James became hooked on pornography in college. The videos that appealed to him the most essentially had to do with young women being humiliated. The actresses would be called dirty names while pretending as if this degradation were a huge turn-on for them. James's fantasy life was a tremendous source of shame for him until he began to recognize the significant association between his earliest traumas and his present-day arousal. As therapy progressed, James connected how the trauma he suffered—ongoing humiliation, physical abuse, and loss of soul—directly related to the nature of the pornography he sought out.

As you can see, James used pornography to attempt to overturn the bullying and abuse through becoming the powerful one in his fantasy. When his sexual behavior was discovered, he tragically experienced yet another round of painful humiliation. Pornography often involves themes of humiliation, violence, and emotional enmeshment because the sex industry knows that porn users who have endured these traumas will be aroused by

the eroticizing of these traumas later in life. You can imagine the futility of James's attempting to stop lusting for humiliating pornography without first recognizing his personal experiences of humiliation. The specifics of our sexual brokenness reveal the very stories of trauma we need to heal from.

Healing requires you to pivot from condemning your lack of willpower to addressing the role trauma may be playing in your unwanted sexual behavior. A heart with an ounce of kindness for your life story will accomplish so much more for you than a mind filled to the brim with strategies to combat lust. Bessel van der Kolk said, "Very few psychological problems are the result of defects in understanding."[48] We tend to focus on the apparent defects because it gives us something to blame, something to control. But what happens when we have nothing left to blame and no "silver bullet" to pursue? We are left with our pain.

Collectively, we prefer to blame our defects in understanding or lack of willpower for our unwanted sexual behavior. The solution is to find the latest and greatest strategy to combat lust. You can spend all your time and money trying to develop strategies to treat bad behavior and forget that the solution to your problem may be evident in the sexual brokenness itself. The more you look for strategies to combat lust or fortify your willpower against unwanted sexual behavior, the further you are from the traumas in your story.

Some of my clients lust not only for sexual behavior but also for the right therapist, the right book, and the right software. They will do almost anything—anything except to slow down to study how the debris of their sexual behavior is telling a story about the unresolved traumas of their lives.

If you ceased striving for a lust-free life, what would you be left with? We can be so preoccupied with filling our lives with something to do rather than trusting that God wants to do something within us. Jesus' invitation to go to him when we are weary and heavy laden is for our sexual failures, but even more so for the trauma beneath those failures. God looks beyond the outward appearance of unwanted sexual behavior and into the heart of what is driving men and women into captivity.

Faith Communities Collude with Trauma

Our way out of sexual brokenness begins by healing the wounds within us. What we will likely find is that attempts to live with sexual integrity without owning our trauma require a militant thwarting of desire. While many religious leaders have recommended prayer, Scripture reading, and other spiritual practices to overcome sexual temptation, very few have encouraged their faith communities to explore the traumas beneath their struggles. Even fewer have recognized the ways their strategies collude with sexual shame.

Through my professional work, I've encountered a legion of examples of men and women who have had their sexual shame only further exacerbated within their faith communities. Their premarital sex was compared to offering lollipops or apples to their sexual partners and leaving only crummy leftovers for their future spouses. They were told not only to refrain from premarital sex but also to bury and run away from all sexual desire at the peak of puberty.

Additionally, few people receive comprehensive sex education, and most sex education, when it does take place, focuses on what to avoid. Try learning how to cook if the only thing you ever learned about was food poisoning. The result of our cultural sexual silence is that the door is wide open for pornography to be the most prominent sex educator of our day. When a religious community practices shaming, the eradication of desire, and silence, it colludes with the effects of sexual shame and trauma.

The individuals I've met over the years in faith communities and religious institutions will often share frighteningly similar reports of those who have been traumatized through catastrophic events. Psychiatrist and researcher Judith Herman wrote,

> Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds

> to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living.[49]

It is an utter tragedy that people who are sexually broken leave the church (what should be the safest, most trustworthy place to explore their sexuality) marked by the trauma of sexual shame and silence.

The next chapter, which is on sexual abuse, is in many ways a second part of our conversation on trauma. I chose to separate it into another chapter for two reasons. First, not all trauma is sexual abuse, but all sexual abuse is a form of trauma. Second, sexual abuse deserves its own singular focus because of the unique and pervasive damage it causes in the lives of my clients and those I research. When I first work with clients, they often say something along the lines of "I don't have a history of sexual abuse that I know of." But then they go on to use words and phrases such as "It was weird," "He was a little off," "I was partially responsible," and "It wasn't *that* sexual." The reality is that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused by the age of eighteen.[50] If our first sexual template was formed somewhere on the spectrum of sexual abuse, it would benefit us to be curious about how the harm may have continued to play out over a lifetime.

FOR REFLECTION:

- What, if any, evidence of trauma do you see in your personal or family life?
- What themes of pornography or unwanted sexual behavior appeal to you? How might these themes be an attempt to reverse or repeat formative traumas in your life?

- In what ways did your faith community shape, for better or worse, your understanding of sex?

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[46] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 21.

[47] Peter Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2010), 31.

[48] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 64.

[49] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic, 1997), 52.

[50] "Statistics about Sexual Violence," National Sexual Violence Resource Center, accessed March 8, 2018, https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

SEXUAL ABUSE

The Corruption of Desire

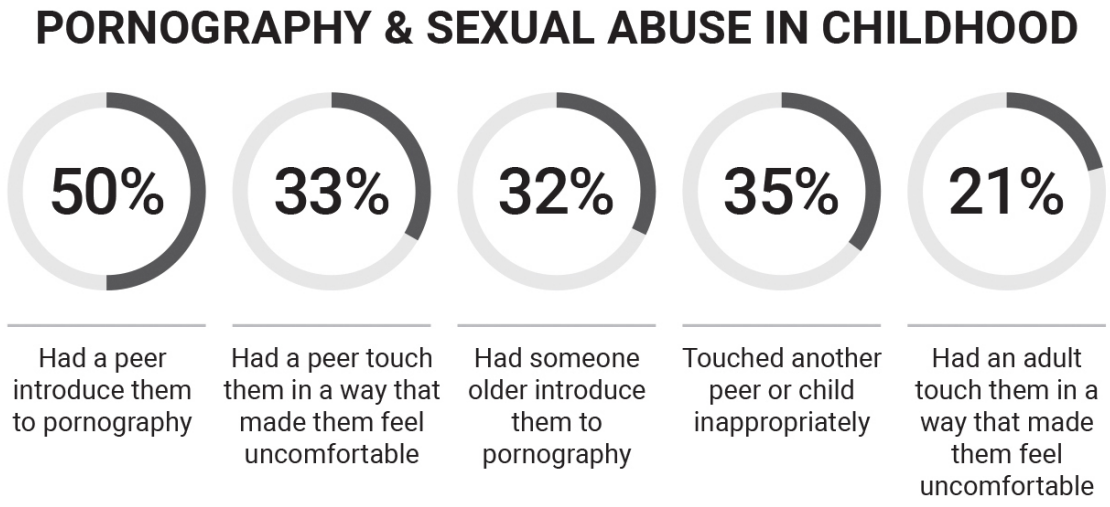
WHEN WE HEAR THE PHRASE *sexual abuse*, we might think of a child who is abducted by a sexual predator in a white van or a young child who was molested by a stranger at the park or troubled kid in the neighborhood. Although these events do occur, the more common experience is for the abuser to be in a position of trust in your family. More than likely, this means a child suffered sexual abuse at the hands of their mother, father, brother, sister, youth pastor, teacher, beloved relative, babysitter, or neighbor. Trust is the paradoxical foundation of sexual abuse.

In my sessions with clients, I've learned that abusers often have a keen awareness that their victims come from dysfunctional family systems. They carefully position themselves as the antidote for all the harm or neglect or boredom children are experiencing. Abusers are excellent readers of their stories and groom them to slowly awaken their desire for life. The madness of sexual abuse is that the initial relationship feels so right before it begins to feel so wrong. Sexual abuse is the biggest driver of unwanted sexual behavior in the clients I work with. It is also the most minimized and overlooked portion of their stories.

My clients often remark that their abusers had a sixth sense for meeting the needs that were unmet by their parents (or if the abuse was done by a parent, for offering them something so much more tangible than the non-abusing parent did). If you were abused, it is likely that your abuser knew your story. He may have known you had a rigid father who refused to play with you. He knew that your mother was too preoccupied with the details of

having a perfect home and was failing to engage your heart with tenderness and delight. Your abuser likely knew that if he engaged you playfully and competitively, he could arouse something in your heart that longed so deeply to be known. The madness of abuse is that we are often offered what our hearts are hungry to experience: attention, touch, and delight.

Respondents in my research disclosed the following:


PORNOGRAPHY & SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHILDHOOD
50%
Had a peer introduce them to pornography
33%
Had a peer touch them in a way that made them feel uncomfortable
32%
Had someone older introduce them to pornography
35%
Touched another peer or child inappropriately
21%
Had an adult touch them in a way that made them feel uncomfortable

Moreover, 11 percent of respondents had been asked to act out something they saw in pornography, and 9 percent had been asked to sexually stimulate someone else during or after viewing pornography.

Childhood sexual abuse was one of the biggest drivers of unwanted sexual behavior in adulthood. Sexual abuse set men and women up for a *lifetime* of sexual madness. My research found the following:

- The sexual-abuse scores of the most significant pornography users were eight points higher compared to those who did not view pornography at all. This represents a score that is 24 percent higher for the most significant users over those who did not view pornography at all.
- Men who had high scores on the sexual-abuse scale were twenty times more likely to buy sex compared to those who had low sexual-abuse scores.

- Men who had high scores on the sexual-abuse scale were thirteen times more likely to want an affair with someone anonymous and fifteen times more likely to want an affair with “someone I know” compared to those who had low sexual-abuse scores.
- Women who had high scores on the sexual-abuse scale were four times more likely to want an affair with “someone I know” compared to those who had low sexual-abuse scores.
- Women who had high scores on the sexual-abuse scale were four times more likely to want an affair with someone anonymous compared to those who had low sexual-abuse scores.
- The average sexual-abuse scores for bisexual persons (average = forty-four) were eight and eleven points higher than the average scores of homosexual and heterosexual persons, respectively.

If your first sexual experiences had to do with a secretive relationship with someone older or with more sexual knowledge, it should not surprise you that you will be aroused by secretive affairs. If someone sexually used you as a child, likely you continue to feel vulnerable to being used by a person who initially delights in you only to use power and coercion for his or her sexual gain (this in no way justifies the abuse of power or blames the victim for the assault). Or, you develop strategies to sexually use other people in order to ensure that you are never again vulnerable. If you are an adult survivor of sexual abuse, it is important that you determine how you will care for yourself as you process your childhood abuse as you read this chapter. As in the story of Clayton you are about to read, it is easy for us to hate ourselves for the pleasure or arousal we gave or received. I wish I could say that this hatred is effective in healing unwanted sexual behavior, but the evidence is that contempt is gasoline on a fire.

Freedom is an often paradoxical and unexpected path that is found through kindness and curiosity. What would it mean for you to bless instead of curse your body for experiencing what it felt? Will you cry out with agony for how your desire was misused instead of remaining silent in your

shame? Honesty and kindness change the human heart. Contempt for arousal and silence in our shame lead to continual pursuit of unwanted sexual behavior.

Clayton's Story

Clayton and his wife purchased a new home shortly after they got married. It was a classic fixer-upper. Clayton was a skilled carpenter who quickly developed the reputation on his street as the man who had the skills and tools to fix just about anything. During a block party, a single woman down the street asked him to help install a new light fixture. Clayton loved the feeling of being desired and soon found himself fantasizing about her sexually.

He completed the electrical work for her and while inside her house noticed that her bathroom could use caulking. He knew that his wife had a hiking trip planned with her friends the following weekend and asked his neighbor if he could help her out with a few touch-up areas around her house. She gladly accepted.

The following weekend, Clayton began pursuing infidelity with his neighbor. He brought over his caulking supplies and made special effort to teach her how to do it. Clayton handed her the caulking gun, stepped behind her, and guided her hands through the proper application. Moments later, they had sex. The affair continued until Clayton's wife suspected there was more going on with his weekend walks around the neighborhood. She followed him one Saturday and saw him walk into the neighbor's home.

Clayton entered therapy remorseful about his decision to have an affair. He spoke to a desire to understand the torrent of emotions he experienced the weekend the affair began. He said, "I felt so aroused and so disgusted with myself, almost simultaneously." As we processed the emotions and body sensations he had surrounding the affair, Clayton began having flashbacks from a family reunion in childhood. He tried to dismiss them, but the memories were buoyant. I asked him to tell me what he was seeing and if there were any stories associated with what his body was feeling.

Clayton’s extended family would gather every year for a reunion in the Shenandoah Mountains in Virginia. He remembered the early years of those trips fondly. He ate his first s’mores, learned how to play his first few chords on a guitar, and fed deer out of the palm of his hand. Those reunions were his favorite part of childhood.

One of the activities Clayton loved was archery. His uncle Frank was an avid hunter and brought a longbow with him each year. Frank would stand behind his nieces and nephews, instructing them how to load and release the arrow. Clayton said, “When my uncle Frank stood behind me, I felt protected and strong. His arms were comforting, and the attention and encouragement he offered were addicting. A bull’s-eye in his presence was as good as it could get for me.”

The summer Clayton turned eight, his uncle Frank became even more attentive. Clayton was assigned to archery setup, which gave him the privilege of carrying the bow and arrows all week. On the second day of the trip, his uncle told him he was not feeling good and was going to stay back in the tent. Frank then invited Clayton to go back to the tent with him to read a book. Clayton was excited to be asked and walked back to his uncle’s tent, which was stuffed with soft sleeping bags and pillows. Inside the tent, Frank asked Clayton to sit on his lap and then opened the book.

Through therapy, Clayton saw that archery was the beginning of his uncle’s grooming process. Frank’s immense power was derived from the barren emotional connection of Clayton’s life. Frank knew that his brother, Clayton’s father, was strict and never taught his son anything except if it had a utilitarian purpose. Frank, on the other hand, was kind and playful. His eyes gave Clayton a delight he was so hungry to experience. Clayton astutely remarked, “I’m seeing that my uncle’s plan was brilliant: He gave me a cup of water because he could tell my heart was so thirsty.”

Clayton’s uncle began reading the book but then paused to tell Clayton how good it was to be together. As he said this, he slowly started to caress Clayton’s leg. Frank said he was feeling a bit warm and slid his shorts down

to get a bit more “cozy.” As Frank read the book aloud, his erect penis rose between Clayton’s legs.

Clayton froze. He looked down, but he also wanted to look away. His uncle felt his tenseness and invited him to “relax a little,” even guiding his breath in the same way he had done in archery. Seconds later, his uncle’s abuse was interrupted. “Daddy?” a small girl’s voice asked. Frank quickly pulled his shorts up, unzipped the tent, and cheerfully talked to his young daughter. “Bethany, you want to come in and read with Clayton and me?”

The next day after lunch, Clayton’s uncle asked him if he wanted to keep reading the story. Clayton recounted, “I remember walking back to my uncle’s tent and looking over at my dad. He was in a camping chair, three beers in, completely oblivious to the world around him.” Inside the tent, his uncle asked him, “What do you think? Do you want to get cozy too?” Clayton was reluctant yet also aroused. He nodded his head yes. His uncle smiled and encouraged him to slide his shorts and Star Wars underwear down to his thighs. The sight of two penises became etched in Clayton’s brain forever. He felt so small yet desired in his uncle’s presence.

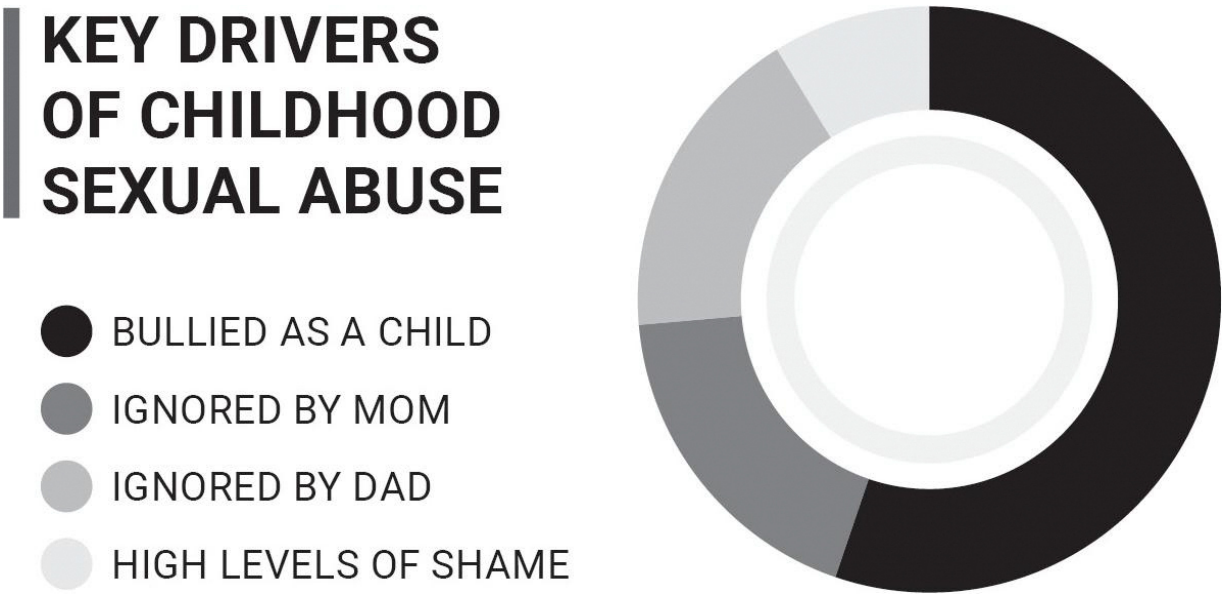
Frank asked, “Do you want to help me feel good?” Clayton nodded his head yes. This decision filled him with greater self-hatred than any decision he has made as an adult. Frank took his hands and guided Clayton in a similar way to archery. Clayton felt power in seeing how much pleasure he could bring him. But along with arousal also came shame and repulsion. After Frank’s climax, he told Clayton, “You did great. I can’t believe how good you are at this.”

Clayton commented to me, “To this day, whenever I experience an orgasm, the initial rest always gives way to feelings of repulsion and guilt. I am never far from that tent. I hate that my uncle remains with me no matter how far I try to go from his memory.”

Corrupted Desire

When abusers are in the grooming process, they work to annul your ability to say no by offering you as many experiences of yes as they can arrange. They study your heart, mind, and body and plot ways to bring you life but ultimately ways to bend you to their purposes. As they earn your trust, they also test limits to see how far they will be able to go.

In Clayton's story, the archery experience was the central part of the grooming. The abuse did not begin in the tent; it began with his uncle showing him something fun and skillful with their bodies connected. His uncle could feel that Clayton's body enjoyed the time of archery, and he saw that Clayton's dad was too zoned out to care or offer protection. The brilliance of the uncle was that by the time he asked if Clayton wanted to "get cozy too," it was too late for Clayton to say no. Everything the uncle had brought to him—s'mores, archery, and his favorite book—were all things Clayton was delighted and hungry to receive.



My research showed that many children who were sexually abused had a predictable story: They were ignored by their parents. Although the abdication of either parent's emotional involvement with their child was damaging, the parent of the same gender of the child had the most significant impact. Male respondents were more likely to be abused as

children when their fathers were not involved in their lives; female respondents were more likely to be abused as children when their mothers were not involved in their lives.

The most significant predictor of sexual abuse was having been bullied as a child. Peter Levine, a leader in the field of trauma, wrote, “People who lack solid early attachment bonding to a primary caregiver, and therefore lack a foundation of safety, are much more vulnerable to being victimized and traumatized and are more likely to develop the entrenched symptoms of shame, dissociation and depression.”[51] Parental abandonment makes children vulnerable to sexual violation. Children who have been sexually violated go on to be exceedingly vulnerable to pursuing unwanted sexual behavior as adults.

Naming the places where our families and communities left us vulnerable to abuse is not an act of betrayal; it is an act of wisdom. You must choose whether to see the context of your abuse with honesty or naiveté. Honesty will lead you to grieve for a child who lacked the foundation of safety and delight. Naiveté surrounding the context of your abuse leaves you to blame yourself as a child for not knowing better. You must assess the cost of each.

Clayton’s abuse influenced him to forfeit a natural experience of desire for a mixture of repulsion and shame. Sexual abuse lays down the foundation for corrupted desire in children. Abuse is so tragic because it takes our God-given longing to be pursued, pleasured, and known and transforms it into something that brings us shame. Abusers want to experience pleasure, but they are also devising ways for their victims to feel pleasure too. Once you feel pleasure, you feel complicit in the abuse. You think to yourself, *How can I say it was wrong if something in me seemed to want it too?* In the aftermath of abuse, victims often despise the parts of themselves that either longed for the relationship or experienced pleasure. If we curse ourselves for these desires, we have few other options: either shut the sexual desire down completely or compulsively pursue sexual experiences as an adult to eclipse the memory of abuse.

Many of us have experienced lifetimes of unwanted and shameful sexual behavior because our abuse formed the blueprint for our sexual lives. In abuse, we are groomed to participate in drama that is secretive, bonding, and pleasurable. But it is also drama that fills us with regret, shame, and contempt. It should not be lost on you that much of your attraction to unwanted sexual behavior may be inviting you to a very similar drama with very similar outcomes. A sexual reenactment is when we return to the sexual blueprint of our abuse in adulthood. Reenactments occur in our pursuit of pornography, a secretive affair, sexual fantasies, and buying sex. We think we have some control of our sexual desire, but our behavior and fantasies ensure that we return to our original sexual shame.

Ambivalence and Abuse: The Complexity of Desire

As awful as it may sound, you likely knew arousal in the presence of your abuser. Abusers know that grooming someone with kindness and trust is the surest way to lead the individual to sexual pleasure. When we feel aroused, we also believe we are complicit. Bessel van der Kolk said it this way:

> It's hard enough to face the suffering that has been inflicted by others, but deep down many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances. They despise themselves for how terrified, dependent, excited, or enraged they felt.[52]

This sense of complicity in the abuse is what intensifies our ambivalence with sexual desire. On one hand, we despise ourselves for what we felt, and we seek to eradicate sexual desire. On the other hand, we may feel drawn to recreate some of the original feelings of excitement or bonding. We hate our desire but simultaneously want to satiate it.

This is why past sexual abuse is so important to address, especially if you've been involved in recovery for long periods of time with no significant healing. Many recovery approaches invite you to stop or declare

war on your lust, which is often appealing because it emulates an approach you developed in the aftermath of abuse. But inevitably you are going to feel pulled to act out. If the only interventions you have are to annihilate desire or phone a friend, the sexual current is going to feel too strong and the interventions will feel too impotent. The reality has to be stated: You are far more likely to be seduced into recreating the dynamics of your sexual abuse than into the mere pursuit of sexual pleasure.

A sexual reenactment occurs when, as an adult, you remix the sexual, thematic, and emotional dramas of your childhood abuse. Clayton's reenactment occurred in the context of his affair. He would later remark, "It was as if I became my uncle Frank. I took the best attributes of who I was and used them to take sexual advantage of someone in need, just as he did with me." Although a single woman's home in Seattle was a world away from a tent in the mountains of Virginia, the sexual, thematic, and emotional story line was strikingly similar.

Clayton's recovery began when he chose to *listen* to what his reenactments were communicating. He recognized three key discoveries that are important for each of us with histories of past sexual abuse:

1. Abuse influenced him to despise his God-given desires to give and receive pleasure. In blessing his desires, he was able to take authority over them, which allowed them to mature beyond the prison walls of abuse.

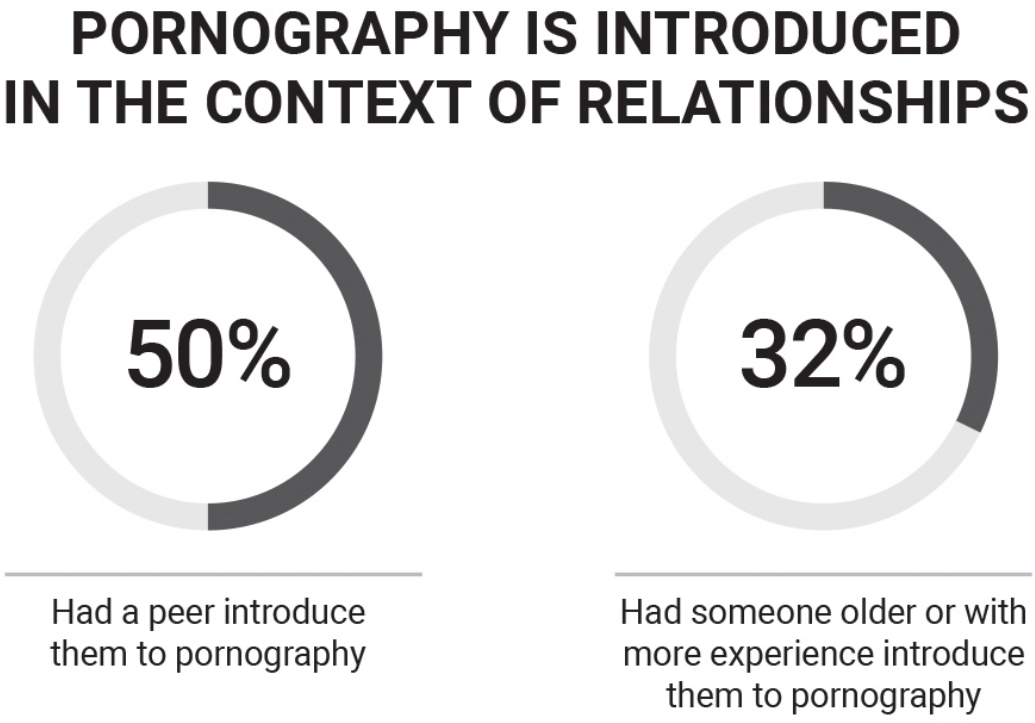
2. His heart to serve others had become compromised by seduction. The temptation in most recovery circles would be to bury one's love of others for the fear of sexualizing future relationships. Clayton instead saw that he needed to outgrow this adolescent sexuality that kept his life small and predictable. The more he owned the shallow patterns of his arousal, the less satisfying they became.

3. Sexual arousal was not a random issue of lust. The fantasy Clayton had to help and seduce women was a predictable story line, straight out of the mountains of Shenandoah. Instead of berating fantasy as abhorrent behavior, he offered kindness and understanding to himself. The less he hated himself, the less power the fantasy held.

Introduction to Pornography as (Subtle) Sexual Abuse

The average age of exposure to pornography is nine for boys and eleven for girls. The tragedy is that this is now considered a normal developmental passage. For a small minority, the exposure is accidental: Maybe they were walking on a trail near their house and stumbled upon a magazine, or they were using the computer and accidentally typed in the wrong website. For most children and adolescents, however, their first exposure to pornography was not a discovery but an introduction.

Overwhelmingly, our first exposure to pornography is in the context of relationships. As we discussed earlier, my research showed that significant percentages of people struggling with unwanted sexual behavior were introduced to pornography “to little extent” or greater by peers (50 percent) or someone older (32 percent). This reveals that more than likely, someone made a deliberate choice to expose you to pornography. It could have been an older child in your neighborhood who wanted to show you a magazine, a father who left pornography inside his bedside nightstand or closet for you to inevitably discover, a group of friends showing you a celebrity sex tape, or a boyfriend showing you a porn video with the suggestion that you both try something similar.


PORNOGRAPHY IS INTRODUCED
IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONSHIPS
50%
Had a peer introduce them to pornography
32%
Had someone older or with more experience introduce them to pornography

Samuel grew up in a modest Christian family. When he was ten years old, his parents got a desktop computer and decided his bedroom was the best spot because it was the only room that had enough space in their small apartment. Samuel's parents warned him about the dangers of pornography, and in the evenings, they would even occasionally knock on his door and say, "You aren't messing around in there, are you?"

Nolan's discovery of pornography came when he was searching through his father's home office. He found a stack of magazines in the bottom right drawer of the desk when his dad was out shoveling snow. Nolan was mesmerized and didn't realize his father had walked back in the house until he heard him say, "Nolan, put that stuff away." His dad walked back outside to finish shoveling the driveway but came in a half hour later, tossed Nolan the keys to the family Suburban, and said, "It's about time you learn how to drive a truck."

Crystal was in sixth grade when she discovered pornography in the guest bathroom at her grandparents' house. Crystal and her siblings would spend long weekends there whenever her parents needed time away. While

she was there, her grandfather would designate chores for the grandchildren. Her brothers tended to have outdoor tasks, such as mowing the grass or raking leaves. Crystal was assigned to clean the guest bathroom and vacuum the bedrooms. Under the bathroom sink, next to the glass cleaner, was her grandfather's pornography stash. Her grandmother once saw her looking through a porn magazine as she cleaned and scolded her for looking at "that trash." Until Crystal began attending a pornography recovery group, it never occurred to her that her grandfather was encouraging her involvement with pornography. One group member said to her, "You don't send your granddaughter to clean the mirrors and not expect her to find your porn next to where you store the glass cleaner."

Connor was in seventh grade when an eighth-grade neighbor named Derek introduced him to pornography on a cell phone on the bus. A few weeks later, Connor was at a sleepover with several of his friends, including Derek, when a few of them started showing each other their favorite porn videos. Sensing Connor's timidity, Derek took him over to the corner of the room, told him to relax, and then showed him how to masturbate.

What should be clear from these four examples is that most people's first encounters with pornography are set up by someone older or with more sexual experience. In this way, many children's and adolescents' introduction to pornography is a form of sexual abuse. Prominent Christian psychologist Dr. Dan Allender wrote, "As difficult as it is to face, the presence of pornography binds the heart of children not merely to the pictures but also to the one who is clearly aroused by those images."[53] Whether we find porn with no one else around or are introduced to it in the presence of others, we associate it not only with erotic content but also with the one who originally collected it.

Present Sexual Brokenness as Reenactment

Addressing the subtle abuse of pornography is important because of the role reenactment is likely playing in your life. For Samuel, this pattern continued to play out with his wife. He would often scroll through various

hashtags on Tumblr and Instagram in the living room. His wife would see him transfixed by his screen and say, “What are you looking at? It always seems as if you are looking at porn.”

For Nolan, reenactment happened with his fifteen-year-old son. Nolan and his son sat down to watch a movie, when a pornography film appeared under the “Continue Watching” section of Netflix. Nolan knew he had been caught and commented, “Well, sometimes you have to do what you have to do.” He went to the fridge and grabbed two beers, one for himself and one for his son. Nolan felt ashamed, but attempting to normalize the behavior for his son gave him great relief. He understood exactly what his father must have felt as he came in from shoveling snow.

Crystal’s reenactment started early in high school when she was asked to feed a neighbor’s cat for a week while the family was on vacation. Inside the neighbor’s house, she felt a rush of arousal and intrigue. As the cat ate, Crystal searched through the bathrooms and bedrooms to try to find porn, which she eventually found in the master bedroom closet. In college, the pattern continued. Hired as a nanny for a family, one night Crystal got the children to sleep and began roaming through the house, trying to find pornography or sex toys. She was unable to find anything, but much to her surprise, she was fired the next day. The family had a nanny cam installed and thought she was trying to steal money or jewelry. She was ashamed but especially relieved that her true intentions were not discovered.

Connor’s reenactment occurred when he joined a senior partner in his firm on a trip to Tampa, Florida. On their taxi ride to the hotel, the partner saw Connor looking at a billboard of a strip club and said to him, “If you’ve never been, Tampa is the place to go. How about we go tonight? We’ll make it a company party. I’ll show you the ropes.” Inside the club, the senior partner paid for private rooms and ordered lap dances for both of them.

It is important to underscore that when each of these individuals entered therapy, none of these connections between their present sexual behavior and past sexual abuse (or in Samuel’s case, setting up the high probability of pornography use) were apparent to them. What this likely

means for you is that there are stories of your own subtle abuse that you have dismissed as irrelevant to your sexual struggle. I am not telling you that you must draw hard conclusions from these stories, but instead I am inviting you to be curious about any scenes that may have flashed through your mind. These scenes are instrumental in helping us understand where we come from and why we remain bound to similar dynamics in the present.

The stunning relational bonds children build are precisely what makes them so vulnerable to being bound to erotic shame with those who introduce them to pornography. Pornography wires the brain and transforms the heart with detrimental consequences. Its introduction to the lives of children and adolescents is rarely neutral. Instead, it is a form of abuse that shapes the trajectory of millions of lives. The introduction to pornography is the left jab that sets up the right hook of a lifetime of unwanted sexual behavior.

▪ ▪ ▪

No doubt if you have read to this point, the stories and concepts may have been disruptive and painful in ways you did not expect. My hope is that you are now pondering the formative events that have shaped your sexual brokenness. As this happens, you will become acutely aware of the stories where God feels particularly absent and the moments you made vows never to tell anyone what you did or what was done to you. As you courageously start to engage your petri dish of sorrow and confusion, you have my sincere admiration and compassion. Keep going. The work you have done to explore the past is preparing you to write a new story of freedom from unwanted sexual behavior.

I hope that as this section comes to a close, you have found a gentler and more informed understanding of the reasons your life has become hijacked by sexual struggle. The totality of your childhood experiences

served as your functional map of the world. To your detriment, the stories you sought to bury or avoid became the foundations of your unwanted sexual behavior.

Knowing the origins of your behavior is central to the recovery process, but it does not cure you. You will also need to address why unwanted sexual behavior is an essential component in your present life. Your unwanted sexual behavior reveals the wounds of your past, but it also highlights the specific day-to-day experiences you will need to transform in order to find freedom.

In the following section, we address another major tributary to the river of unwanted sexual behavior: your present-day difficulties. This section will highlight the ongoing struggles in intimate relationships as well as the unresolved struggles you face on a daily basis. Your childhood experiences set the trajectory of your behavior and remain self-reinforcing for you as an adult. Unwanted behavior can be disrupted only when the engine that sustains it is exposed and dismantled. That is the work you will begin in part 2: “Why Do I Stay?”

FOR REFLECTION:

- When and how did you first view pornography? Do you continue to pursue similar pornographic themes to this day?
- If you were sexually abused, did your abuser have a trusted role in your life or family?
- What did your abuser know about what you were hungry to experience or where you were uniquely vulnerable?

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[51] Peter Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2010), 60.

[52] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 13.

[53] Dr. Dan Allender, *Healing the Wounded Heart: The Heartache of Sexual Abuse and the Hope of Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 104.

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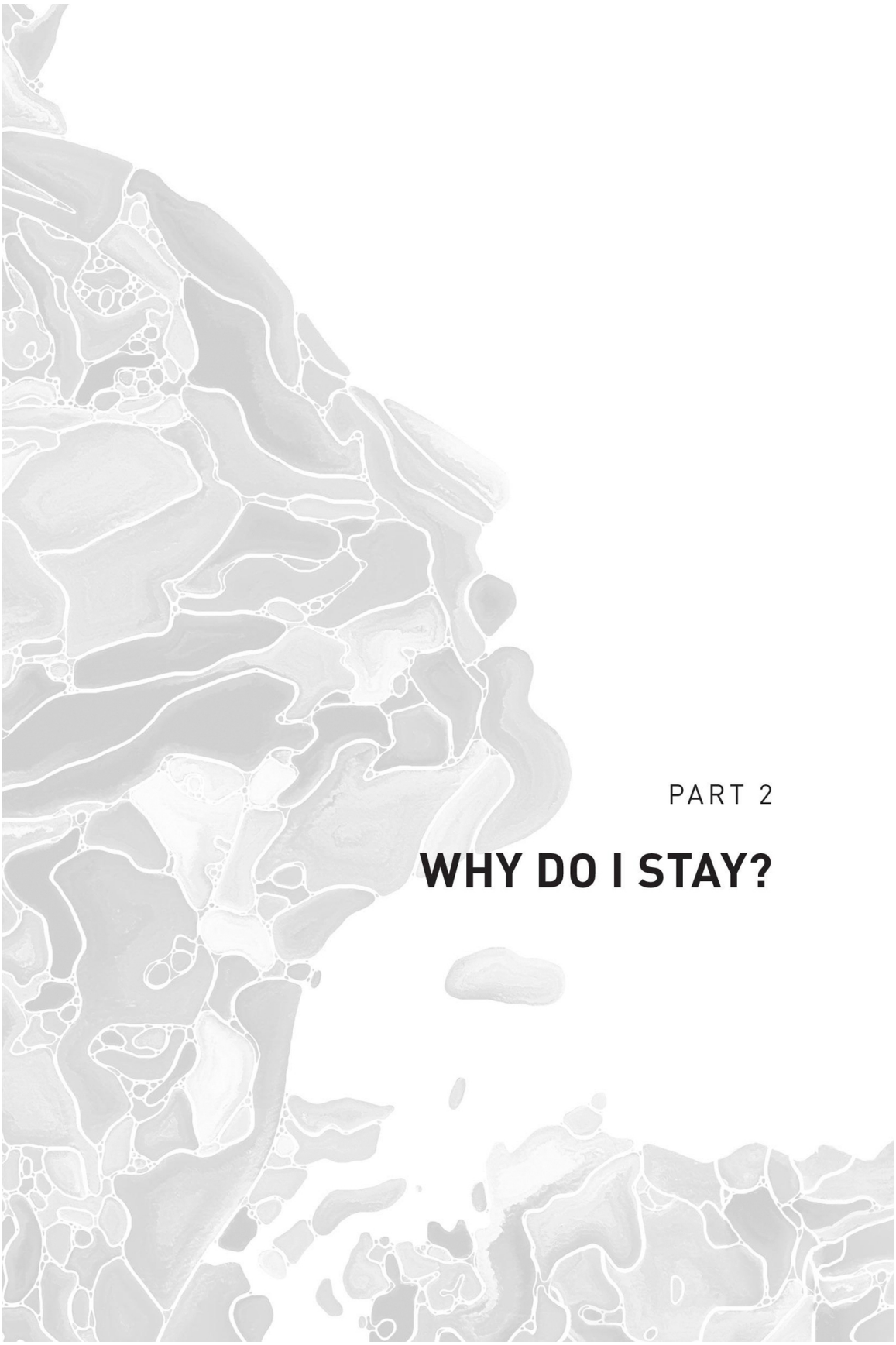

PART 2

WHY DO I STAY?

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SIX CORE EXPERIENCES OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

EMILY SAT ON MY THERAPY COUCH and burst into tears. She looked up in desperation and said, “Here I am again. Why am I such an idiot? Why do I stay in this stupid cycle? I keep going back to the thing I know is ruining my life.”

Part 2, “Why Do I Stay?” is about understanding why unwanted sexual behavior remains a prominent feature in our lives, despite the consequences. Most people have a clear understanding of the behavior they wish to stop but have far less clarity regarding the key drivers that inform *why* they stay involved in unwanted sexual behavior.

Imagine looking out at your lawn on a warm spring day and saying, “That’s it. I am sick of all the weeds! This year, I am committing to annihilating these infidels once and for all!” Then you walk out with a pair of purple scissors you’ve had since kindergarten and start cutting a couple of inches above the soil. It is absurd, but many of us take this approach to recovery.

Rather than trying to stop your unwanted sexual behavior, ponder for a moment how unwanted sexual behavior has come to serve you. What would you do on a business trip without pornography? When your spouse is distant or angry, where else would you direct your anger? When you are cornered with the lack of purpose in your life, where else would you flee to? One man who was under immense financial distress said to me, “I go to

sex because it's better than the feeling I have not going to sex." Liberation is possible, but leaving unwanted sexual behavior will put you in difficult terrain, without your most dependable getaway vehicle.

As a clinician, I've observed six core experiences that together usher someone into unwanted sexual behavior. Although we'd love a linear, formulaic process that simplifies restoration into easy steps, most oversimplified approaches fail because they drive us toward the desired outcome in cruise control. A desire to stop pursuing unwanted sexual behavior will be only as effective as your ability to identify and dismantle the underlying infrastructure that creates your need for it. Let's take a look at the cycle.

A Vicious Cycle

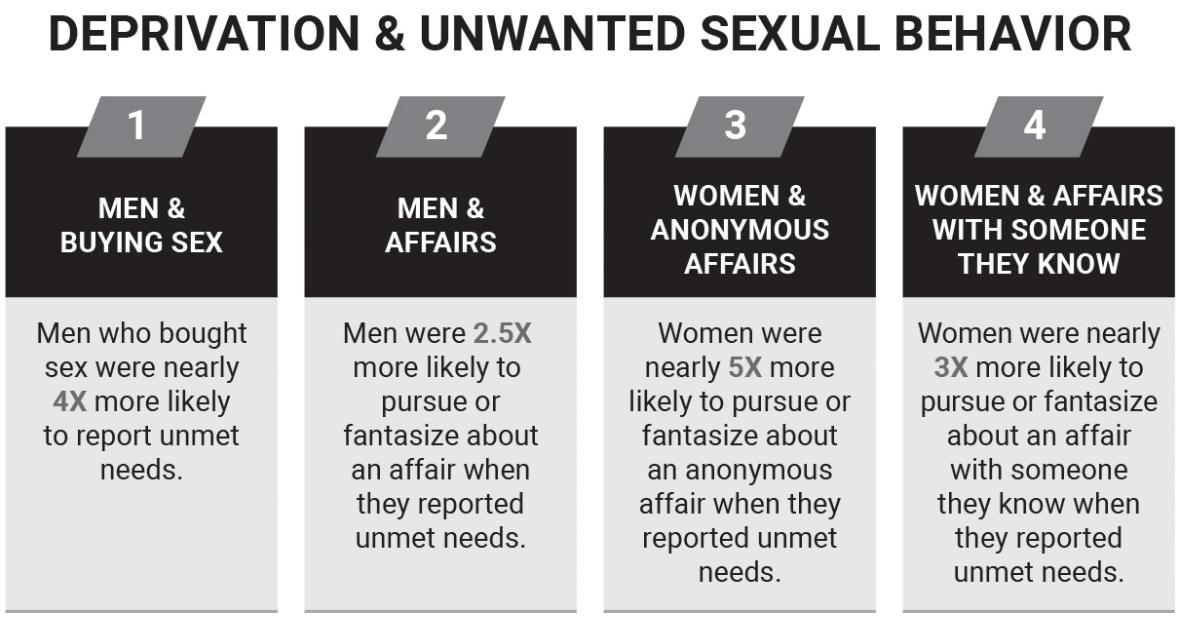
Unwanted sexual behavior forms when six core life experiences are linked together: deprivation, dissociation, unconscious arousal, futility, lust, and anger. Any of these experiences on their own are not enough to create pervasive damage. Rather, it is when these experiences link and reinforce one another that the stage is set for unwanted sexual behavior to appear. These experiences usually exist unexamined and therefore lead to a predictable, pernicious cycle that traps the soul over time.

When the six experiences bind together, the cycle of unwanted sexual behavior begins. To disrupt this cycle, the six experiences must be addressed holistically and simultaneously because they rarely exist on a linear continuum. For instance, you could be having a terrible week at work (futility) and come home to watch four random hours of Netflix (dissociation). You are upset with yourself for how unproductive you are (anger) and then find yourself scrolling through a porn site (lust and anger) to offer yourself a momentary reprieve from disappointment. The next evening, a friend invites you over to hang out, but you say no to something good (deprivation) because you feel so disappointed in who you are. Your shame then drives you to even more pornography use. Unwanted sexual behavior does not happen out of thin air. There is always a context.

Experience 1: Deprivation: Addiction's Seesaw

Although unwanted sexual behavior appears to be a towering tree of self-indulgence, its strength comes from the massive roots of deprivation beneath the surface. Deprivation and addiction share similar architecture, serving one another when the other is absent, much like a seesaw. Those who deprive themselves of meaningful relationships and self-care are more likely to require other people or things to offer what they are lacking, even if they are destructive forms of the real need. The compulsive choices provoke their counterparts: The more the individuals act out, the more likely they are to deprive themselves of meaningful relationships and self-care because they do not feel as if they deserve them.

In my research, when women and men perceived they had unmet needs—meaning they did not believe that their needs were important or they felt they needed to be secretive to get their needs met—they were incredibly susceptible to unwanted sexual behavior:


DEPRIVATION & UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR
1
MEN & BUYING SEX
Men who bought sex were nearly 4X more likely to report unmet needs.
2
MEN & AFFAIRS
Men were 2.5X more likely to pursue or fantasize about an affair when they reported unmet needs.
3
WOMEN & ANONYMOUS AFFAIRS
Women were nearly 5X more likely to pursue or fantasize about an anonymous affair when they reported unmet needs.
4
WOMEN & AFFAIRS WITH SOMEONE THEY KNOW
Women were nearly 3X more likely to pursue or fantasize about an affair with someone they know when they reported unmet needs.

Ignoring your needs is not virtuous; it is dangerously irresponsible. Your spouse, parents, and friends are not responsible for meeting your needs—you are.

Lawrence was two years out of medical school when he sought treatment. He described his residency as

> the worst hell since middle school, only now with other people's lives on the line. I was working ninety hours a week, responsible for saving lives, and at the same time ridiculed by the other doctors for any mistake I made. I was completely exhausted by work and the demands on my life. When I finally had a day off, I would crash. I didn't eat or sleep well. I was losing touch with people, and the only thing that carried me was what life would be like when I finished. Money and power are in the back of every resident's mind.

Pornography had been part of Lawrence's life off and on during medical school, but when he completed his residency, his unwanted sexual behavior amplified. He started using dating apps for hooking up and ended up buying sex several times.

> Looking back now, I see that it was entitlement from a decade of deprivation and training. I had just finished the most rigorous feat I could imagine and now had money and power. I had decent friends in undergrad, but by the time I finished med school, I didn't have one close relationship. I remember thinking that even if I wanted to get married, I didn't have a single friend who could be a groomsman. This made it easy to continue what I was doing.

The catch-22 of deprivation is that it promotes entitlement while requiring that one sink even deeper into deprivation.

One of the primary reasons men and women stay in a place of unwanted sexual behavior for decades is that they have not addressed the areas of self-deprivation in their lives. My research showed that only 27 percent of pornography users had a solid pattern of self-care (exercise, eating well, and time with friends). The majority of those who struggle with

unwanted sexual behavior choose passivity over against asking for what they need or being honest about what they are experiencing. They roam through life feeling overworked or underappreciated, which sets up entitlement for experiences they believe they deserve.

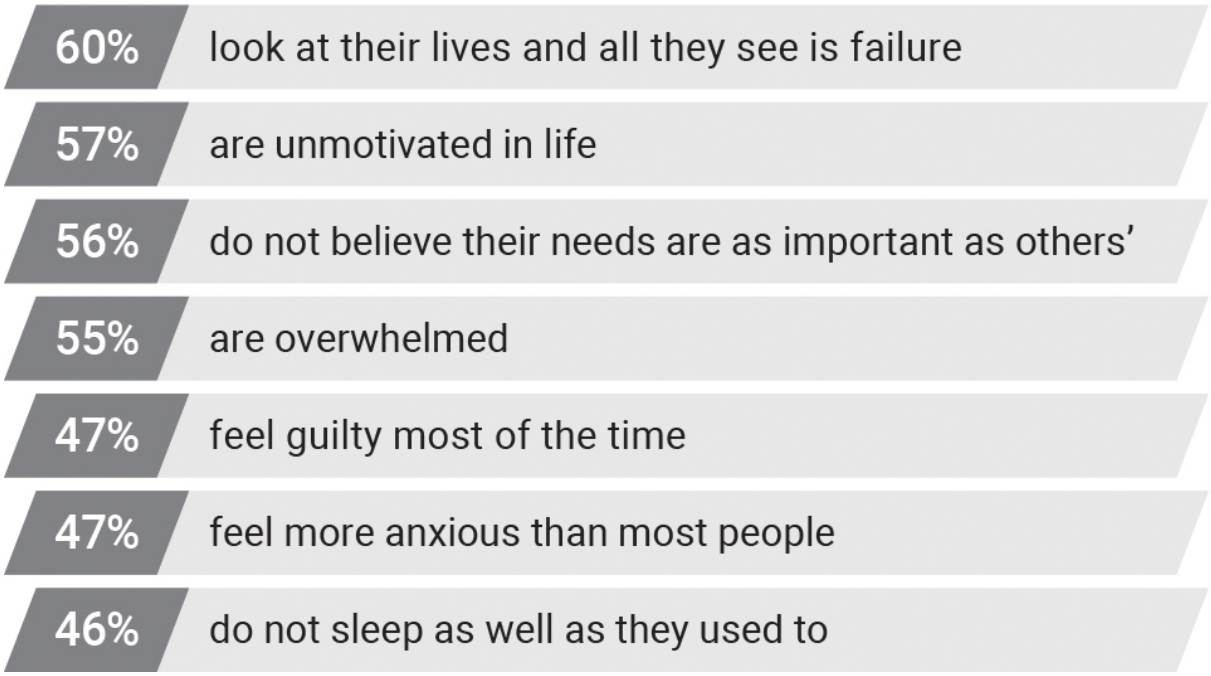
Deprivation occurs in both overt and subtle ways. It may appear superficially noble, such as always deferring to others to decide where to go to dinner because of the fear of making the wrong choice, or taking on extra projects at work because of preferring exhaustion and stress over rest and meaningful relationships. For others, it is a neglect of basic physical care. When I ask my clients about sleep or the last time they visited a doctor or dentist, the answers are often alarming. They commonly report feeling as though they are behind on something, such as work projects or cleaning out their cars. One client told me that his company owed him more than $125,000 and in the same session told me that a yoga membership and eating more healthful foods would be too expensive.

The painful discovery many people make is that they never noticed how deep the roots of deprivation were until they found themselves trapped in unwanted sexual behavior. Suspending the impulse to condemn this behavior will allow curiosity about the ways addiction purports to nourish legitimate needs. It is difficult to see how far we have wandered in search of these legitimate needs, but it is our lament that gives us the courage to return home. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger brother discovers his deprivation through feeling the hunger in his belly and the shame in his soul. Paradoxically, it is the awareness of this deprivation and squandering behavior that fills him with the longing to return to the comfort of his father’s home.

Experience 2: Dissociation: The Great Escape

Unwanted sexual behavior is an escape but also a return to a familiar poison. What exactly are we trying to escape from? My research findings offer some perspective:

WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO ESCAPE?


60% look at their lives and all they see is failure
57% are unmotivated in life
56% do not believe their needs are as important as others'
55% are overwhelmed
47% feel guilty most of the time
47% feel more anxious than most people
46% do not sleep as well as they used to

If your life is full of failures, lack of motivation, guilt, feelings of being overwhelmed, and anxiety, you are clearly going to want to flee reality. This flight from reality is known as dissociation. Dissociation depressurizes the difficult work required for us to become mature and competent adults.

Dissociation is a psychological term used to describe disconnecting from full engagement with your body and the relationships around you. Dissociation is likely something you have been doing since childhood. Think about the hours of TV, video games, and Internet you consumed growing up. For many individuals, the distractions of technology were more consistent than a deep, loving engagement with meaningful relationships.

We experience these dissociative moments every day and in almost any context. I remember lying on the floor next to my children when they were infants. One moment I was staring into their eyes, mirroring their smiles and echoing their coos. Seconds later, I was looking at the cell phone I had placed behind their heads, checking my e-mail, scrolling through my

Instagram account, and seeing how many likes a recent Facebook post had brought in. Dissociation seduces us out of the present moment and into a meaningless world of distraction.

Dissociation becomes more complex when it is woven into sexual arousal. When I work with couples attempting to rebuild their marriages after the negative effects of an affair, pornography addiction, or buying sex, we eventually begin to talk about the particulars of their sex lives, from the initial moments of arousal to the restful moments post orgasm. What happens between couples in these moments reveals and predicts the quality of their sexual lives. For most couples, although their bodies are woven together, the dramas unfolding in their minds could not be further apart.

Many men express anger at their wives for their apparent fickleness with desire, but beneath the surface is intimidation. A man intuitively recognizes that a woman's desire is far deeper and more complex than his own. Although she may have ebbs and flows of sexual desire, the holistic longing she has for intimacy will often far surpass his own. Confronted with this reality, a husband can see it as an invitation for personal and relational growth, or he will default to an angry disappointment that his wife's arousal does not function in the same masculine manner. For men to change, they must exchange blame for the opportunity to grow.

Most often, men resort to hiding and blaming to avoid the necessity for change. Men who have demanding or overly intimate mothers are likely to perceive their spouses in a similar fashion. Cognitively, you may know that your wife is not your mother, but emotionally you have a harder time telling the difference. Men who have experienced abandonment or disengagement may constantly project these dynamics onto their wives. The issue here, though, is not that the man is wounded by a parent figure; it is that he insists on creating a relationship in which he can use blame to aid him in avoiding the need for maturity.

Most men have an intuitive sense that more attunement and delight with their partners would improve their sex lives dramatically. Instead, they fall into the trap of feeling powerless or angry. Many wives, through many

headaches, know it will cost too much to ask their husbands to offer something different—to engage, to honor, and to stay connected. A woman knows that what is likely to follow is either her husband's cowardly departure or toxic blaming because she resists giving herself over to his linear pleasure. When a couple will not engage with delight, affection, and individual passion, both will be tempted to escape into private arousal narratives.

Therefore, a husband or wife may be physically joined with his or her spouse but emotionally and spiritually fused with someone else in a fantasy. Men and women may play out a fantasy with an ex-lover or a person from the office. And if one partner is involved with pornography, he or she may recall the most recent content. Most people are not proud of these fantasies, but at some level, they feel justified because their spouses are not the lovers they desire. Dissociation in marriage seduces you to leave the difficult relational realities of the present and escape to a fantasy arousal where you are in control, appreciated, and entitled.

Forms of dissociation (such as adulterous fantasy), to some degree, are present in every marriage. This is not something to be condemned by or ashamed of. Dissociation is an opportunity for what Jesus refers to as *metanoia*, which my theologian friends say is unfortunately translated as "repentance." The better definition would be a turning or revolution (*meta*-) in the mind or consciousness (*nous*). The climax of Paul's theology in Romans 12 (verse 2) is a call to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (again, the word *nous*).

Marriage will expose that our minds are far more broken than we could have ever conceived. But more importantly, it gives us opportunities to renew our minds. Marital faithfulness is not predicated on the absence of failure but on the persistent commitment to renewing our minds. The choice to repent creates the possibility for personal integrity and relational growth to occur. The more we recognize our need for Jesus, the more we will grow.

Experience 3: Unconscious Sexual Arousal: Understanding Seduction

Sexual arousal, and the pleasure we derive from it, was God's intention. As we learned, sexual arousal can be distorted only through being a parasite of how God designed our erotic lives to function. Sexual arousal is a road map to our unprocessed lives and one of the primary dimensions God will use to aid our redemption. The more we understand what our sexual fantasies symbolize, the more we can allow them to show us the road to redemption.

"Every part of my day is full of sexual arousal," Joseph said with exasperation. "I get on the bus and wait to see if the most attractive woman will notice me. I walk into work and can't keep from noticing what the women in my office want me to notice. And when I get online, pop-up ads and clickbait with beautiful women come up. All. Day. Long." Joseph would then freeze-frame the images and scenes until later in the day or week, when he would masturbate or have sex with his wife.

Joseph found himself fantasizing about being sexual with his colleagues late in the evening after his coworkers left work or leaving on a lunch break to go to a hotel a few blocks from his office. The only way he knew to stop his arousal was to imagine his wife discovering him in the hotel. Joseph's fantasies were largely about creating a repetitive and familiar world of arousal. Arousal may, at first glance, seem as self-explanatory as a desire to be with an attractive partner (and, yes, it may be just that), but it is rarely that stagnant. It moves forward, constructing a story, complete with a plot, themes, characters, and dialogue. Even though Joseph knew his fantasies, the meaning remained unconscious.

So how does Joseph filter through the barrage of images and story lines to decide which ones to act upon or fantasize about? This will primarily involve the process of narrative as we take pictures and scenes and, like a film director, allow them to tell a story.

The Arousal Cocktail

The story lines and themes of our arousal reveal the imprints of our emotional and sexual histories. This could be repeating situations we have known in the past, as we will come to see in Joseph's case. Or it could be a counter story line, such as a woman who begins opening herself up to an affair because she finds her husband emotionally vacant. Rather than allow this fantasy to invite her to greater integrity in fighting for her marriage, she finds excitement and revenge in seeking out an affair. To understand why your sexual brokenness is part of your story, you need to identify the blueprints of your sexual and relational stories.

When I ask clients about the particulars of their arousal, they are either embarrassed or offended, but the main response is something along the lines of "That is strange to talk about. I've never really thought about it, much less been asked. Why is that important?" I respond by saying that all of us have an arousal map or cocktail, which is a constellation of thoughts, images, fantasies, objects, and situations that sexually arouse us. For some, this could be the anonymity of a business trip; a wallet full of cash, symbolizing to them power and possibility; an empty house, where their behavior will not be interfered with; or a guys' trip to Vegas, where excess of money and alcohol gives way to sexual risks.

Your Fantasies (May) Reveal Your Stories

Joseph had an arousal map that was shaped by the season of his father's affair when Joseph was ten years old. His father was a banker. The summer before Joseph began sixth grade, his mother came into the living room, where he was playing Nintendo 64, and disclosed that his dad was likely cheating on her. She told him to accompany her for an investigation. For about two weeks, they would leave the house around 11:30 a.m. and sit in the parking lot across from the bank, waiting for his dad to take a lunch break. When he finally left the bank, they would follow him across town as he dined at various restaurants.

Joseph would sit in the idling car as his mom would discreetly walk by cafés and enter restaurants to confirm that his dad was eating alone.

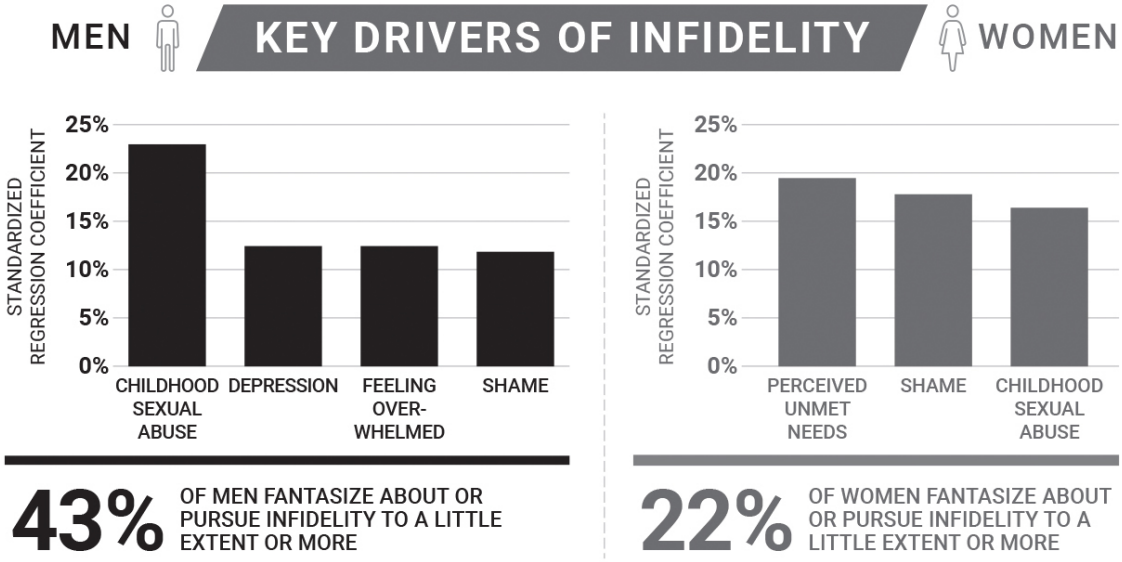
> These times were entirely arousing to me—the search, the anticipation of what we might discover, and the endless curiosity about the type of woman my dad would find attractive. My mom and I were voyeurs, in a way, and I began sexualizing particular women on these stakeouts. I would look at their shoes, their pants, their dresses, and begin to take guesses as to which ones would be more likely to have an affair. It's so crazy to me that I am still doing this.

The second week of their mother-son investigation (a clear form of triangulation), they followed Joseph's dad to a local hotel. "My body was pumping with adrenaline. I wanted to catch him, I wanted to know who he was sleeping with, and I also dreaded the outcome because I knew he would leave our family and I'd be stuck with my mom for the rest of my life." His father checked into the hotel and walked to his room on the second floor. Minutes later, a woman his mother knew from a work party joined his dad in the hotel. "My mom went berserk. She screamed inside the car, opened up the car door, and sprinted to the second floor. She stood outside the hotel room, cursing, screaming, and pounding on the door."

As counseling progressed, we explored how deeply Joseph's sexuality was formed the summer of his father's affair. In his adult life, he repeated these investigations to find candidates for an affair. For Joseph, the prospect of an affair is wildly more arousing than pornography because it is closely aligned with the particular ways his sexuality was formed and harmed.

Although your story may not involve stakeouts with your mother, your task is to understand how your unique fantasies may be revealing portions of your story. Many people continue to act out in similar ways over a lifetime because they have never taken time to think about the symbols and stories inherent within their arousal and fantasies. These sexual reenactments must be named if you have any hope to find freedom. Your arousal map is not a life sentence; it is an opportunity to discover your life and exchange a broken and unconscious map for a redeemed one.

The fantasy to pursue an affair is not a random event for married men and women. The illustration below shows the key drivers of infidelity in men and women. The standardized regression coefficient percentage on the vertical axis shows the strength of the association between the desire for an affair and the other key themes that might be affecting your life. Your desire for an affair may be revealing the stories that most need your involvement.



Experience 4: Futility: A Lack of Purpose Binds Men to Pornography

One of the most powerful, though not entirely surprising, findings in my study was the association between pornography and a lack of purpose. The greater a man's futility, the more likely he was to increase his pornography use. In fact, men were seven times more likely to escalate their pornography use if they lacked purpose in their lives. These men felt as if the work they did were meaningless, struggled to find a sense of purpose, looked back over their lives and saw many failures, and often felt unmotivated.

It is crucial to understand the implication of this finding: You cannot change your relationship to pornography if you do not have an effective plan for engaging the lack of purpose in your life. Pornography is not an

isolated struggle; it is a symptom of a much larger issue of futility. Men who do not have strategies to transform their futility inevitably begin to lean on something to assuage the powerlessness they feel.

One of the fascinating trends with Google Analytics is that we can now track porn data to specific cultural events. One example of this would be the 2017 NBA Finals between the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Golden State Warriors. According to a popular porn site, when the San Francisco Bay Area knew that the Warriors were about to win the championship in game 5, porn traffic in the city was 21 percent below average. Once the game was over, porn traffic in the Bay Area returned to normal. But residents of Cleveland? The city's porn use increased 34 percent, from -6 percent during the game to a staggering +28 percent after the game was over.[54] The role of futility in our work, our relationships, and even our favorite pastimes cannot be underestimated in shaping our attraction to pornography.

Genesis 3 provides a very good starting point for understanding the nature of futility as it relates to a man's life. In the passage, Adam and Eve have just eaten from the tree they were commanded not to eat from. God is not terribly pleased and begins outlining the curse for Adam:

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
> and you shall eat the plants of the field.
> By the sweat of your face
> you shall eat bread,
> till you return to the ground,
> for out of it you were taken;
> for you are dust,
> and to dust you shall return.
>
> VERSES 17-19, ESV

According to this passage, the curse for a man is that his life will be marked largely by what we would refer to as futility.[55] Everything a man attempts to do in life will eventually be marked with difficulty, pain, and meaninglessness. You can almost hear the taunt of this curse: “Go ahead. Build what you wish. But it’s all going to be surpassed. It’s all going to burn.”

Men find pornography appealing precisely because it allows the “thorns and thistles” of futility to disappear, at least for a moment. Futility is experienced when we work hard to get a promotion at work but are passed up. It’s when student loan debt compounds faster than we can pay it off. It’s when all the efforts we take to change our lives leave us only more discouraged.

A lack of purpose will eventually lead to behavior where very little risk or imagination is required. This is one of the reasons men are drawn, magnetically, to *watching* others, whether it’s through porn, sports, or television. Nothing is required except consumption. In watching the drama of characters unfold on a screen, there is no personal crucible for change. In watching others play sports, there is no physical commitment required to experience victory. In watching pornography, there is no relational maturity required to reach orgasm. Watching provides men a world without futility—that is, until they attempt to get out.

The draw toward pornography does not indicate that you need to get your boxing gloves out for a heavyweight fight against lust. Instead, it may be revealing the latent pursuit of purpose in your life. We often live afraid of being “caught” in our pornography use, but in reality, pornography has already caught us in futility. Rather than fighting lust or shame, let your sexual brokenness motivate you to find greater meaning in life. If you want to fight, don’t fight to eliminate desire; fight to discover meaning.

Max, an assistant manager at a local warehouse club store, started therapy after he was tested for a sexually transmitted infection. The results were negative, but his doctor encouraged him to pursue help if he sensed his behavior was getting out of control. The doctor recognized that men

who buy sex tend to become reckless with their lives. Max cared less and less about the things that once mattered the most to him—his body, relationships, and career—essentially anything that had the potential of bringing goodness and meaning to life.

In our second session, Max talked openly about the trajectory of his sexual behavior that escalated into his decision to buy sex for the first time. Although not all men who watch porn will go on to buy sex, Max found his pornography use to be a significant factor in his ultimate decision to buy sex. He disclosed that scenes of women on their knees serving men were the most appealing to him. In reflecting about this, he noted, "Over the years, I have had an increased pull toward scenes that were aggressive, even violent at times. Normal sex between a man and a woman just didn't do it for me anymore. A screen did not do it for me anymore. I needed a person."

More than 50 percent of men who buy sex have a current sexual partner.[56] These statistics seem to imply that there is something other than loneliness or an absence of sex that is contributing to these men's entitled demand of sexual exploitation. Much like viewing pornography, soliciting sex allows a man to enter a world that exists above the fray of futility.

I asked Max if he had any sense of what was currently fueling his behavior. He disclosed that another warehouse was opening in the area and he had been the supposed front-runner for a managerial position. In the end, another manager received the offer. An opportunity he thought would change the trajectory of his career instead became another iteration of disappointment. As far as he could forecast, his life held little purpose.

At the end of that agonizing week, he searched online for a young prostitute. He made the necessary arrangements and arrived in a hotel parking lot on the north side of town an hour later. As he waited in his hotel room, he knew exactly what he was about to purchase: the right to order a woman, really a teenager, to kneel before him and serve him precisely the way he wished. Futility fueled his entitlement and anger. Max and many men are bound to compulsive behavior because they do not metabolize their futility without turning toward a sexualized anger.

The madness of unwanted sexual behavior is that the very thing we develop to assuage a lack of power ends up becoming a powerful master over us. Futility is never content with ruining one aspect of someone's life; it wants to reproduce, infiltrating *every* aspect. This is pornography's seduction to men: Bring me your weary and defeated heart, and I will give you a world where it will all go away. In the end, pornography confiscates not only your purpose but also your heart.

Experiences 5 and 6: Lust and Anger: Unrestrained Desire and the Demand for Control

To be sure, lust is one of the most important contributing factors to sexual brokenness. But in our focus on lust, we easily lose sight of the other interrelated factor that drives our unwanted sexual behavior more than all the rest: anger.

As we briefly explored in chapter 3, despite the potential damage lust and anger cause, they are not holistically something to condemn. Lust points to a great desire for a good thing, like beauty or belonging. Anger aims at our longing for justice and restoration. Sin enters when lust is hijacked by covetousness or demand and when anger is hijacked by entitlement, contempt, or dogmatic control. Sexual brokenness can never be redeemed through futile attempts to stop lust that ignorantly disregard the insidious role anger plays in fueling it. By aiming at their partnership, however, beauty, belonging, and restoration can indeed become the foundation of our sexual lives.[57]

In Matthew 5, Jesus addresses the nature of sin. He says that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully (*epithumeó*: to covet)[58] commits adultery in his heart. Often overlooked, however, are Jesus' remarks on anger that appear first in Matthew 5:22. Jesus says that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. James 4 brings these together: Lust and anger are related.[59] Jesus' words are a tough pill to swallow. In our sin, we are not only adulterers, but murderers too.

Lust and anger are even present in my children's lives, although the presentation is often very endearing. When my son was almost two years old, my wife and I reveled in how much he loved such a wide range of foods. It didn't matter if it was chocolate, goldfish crackers, kimchi, seaweed, or kale—he wanted it all. One day I came home with takeout from a Thai restaurant. He saw the iconic white takeout box, and his body started dancing with excitement. I placed the food on the table, and he looked up and pointed his fingers to his tongue, saying, "Uh huh, uh huuhhh." I opened the takeout box and offered him one piece of chicken. He exploded with anger. He fell to the ground and pounded his little fists onto the hardwood floors. "No! TALLL BITE! BIGG BITE!" As you can see, desire, if not satisfied, will often give birth to anger.

Lust and anger are the primary tributaries that flow into the river of unwanted sexual behavior. I have never met someone who struggles deeply with lust who is not also battling with unaddressed anger. You can lust for pornography, but in the background, you might be angry at your spouse for not being sexual enough. You can be angry that a friend did not invite you to a party, and almost immediately you find yourself lusting for a hookup to override the experience of betrayal. Lust is important to address, but it is like a car battery: It starts the engine, but we need anger to fuel our drive through unwanted sexual behavior.

Unequivocally, I believe male anger to be at the heart of much of the sexual brokenness and violation in our world. We will explore this concept in more detail in the following chapters. Rarely do I meet men who are consciously aware of their eroticized anger. Instead, they see their drive for sex as a mash-up of emotions such as loneliness, frustration, and disappointment.

One client put it like this:

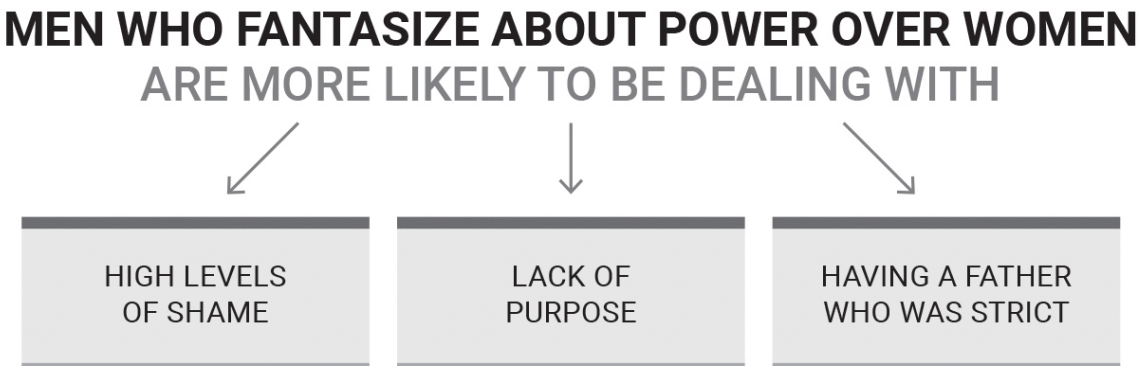
> My wife and I were eating dinner and got in a fight about something stupid. I think it was really one of those fights about who took out the garbage last. We started stonewalling, and she

> eventually just left the table and turned on Netflix. I was ticked and headed to the basement. Next thing I know, I was scrolling through social-media sites and ended up looking at porn on Tumblr. I hated the bind I was in. I didn't want to be looking at porn, but I end up feeling so sexual when I am frustrated.

We can lust for sex; we can lust for food; we can lust for virtually any dimension of life. But when we do not get what we desire, we find our hearts full of anger and we demand to be filled. This is why treatment paradigms that exclusively focus on lust management (blocking software, accountability groups) and trauma-focused therapy (attachment theory, EMDR) will only go so far in maturing people. These paradigms contain dangerous "partial truths" that set people up to continue to sexually fail because the other half of the equation is left to fester in hiding.

Want to find out why you're so compelled to pursue unwanted sexual behavior? Figure out what's made you so angry.

Let's take a look at how the confluence of lust and anger shaped the sexual fantasies of the respondents in my research. The most common sexual fantasy men had was the desire for power over women. Men who wanted power over women tended to fantasize about teen, petite, and college-aged women from another race and pursued fantasies in which women were portrayed as submissive. What predicted this type of sexual fantasy in men? As it turned out, there were three main factors: their relationships to shame, their sense of futility, and the strictness of their fathers.


MEN WHO FANTASIZE ABOUT POWER OVER WOMEN
ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE DEALING WITH
HIGH LEVELS OF SHAME
LACK OF PURPOSE
HAVING A FATHER WHO WAS STRICT

Men who wanted power over women had the highest levels of shame, lacked significant purpose, and had fathers who were overwhelmingly strict. The writing on the wall was that men found power over women arousing precisely because it gave them an arena to find dominance amidst the difficulties they were facing in life. Lust gives men the opportunity to escape pain, but eroticized anger demands someone else be used to exact revenge on the situation or person causing their discomfort.

If we do not marvel at and honor beauty, we will inevitably bend it toward our control. As a society, we seem to be waking up to the reality of how much the beauty of women has been exploited for the sexual gain of men. In porn, we see this with even greater clarity. For many years, the most visited pornography site in the world was devoted to women stripping on webcams. A unique feature of this site was that it allowed men to tell the women what they wanted to see them perform on camera. Estimates at the time were that of the billion people using the Internet, 2.5 percent visited the site each month, equating to an astronomical thirty-two million people. [60]

Sites like this, though fairly benign according to porn standards, show how committed men are not just to lust for beauty but also to direct the lives of women for sexual entitlement. I am convinced that one of the reasons we have not seen more progress in the reduction of pornography is that it seems very few people outside of Jesus and pornographers seem to understand that the heart is seduced by behaviors that allow lust and anger to be indulged.

Pornography traces the human heart's trajectory from lust to a demand to control beauty and, if you stay long enough, to a desire to see the body and face of a woman degraded.

If you want to see your unwanted sexual behavior transformed, name anger and lust as the partners in crime they are. Too often, people of faith have been loquacious in discussing purity, lust, and even sexual addiction, but largely silent on the issue of anger and power as it relates to male violence against women. Our preoccupation with lust and our avoidance of anger may be central to why many of us have not been able to find freedom. We cannot transform sexualized anger when we have so little language, or willingness, to state that it exists.

The six core experiences of deprivation, dissociation, unconscious arousal, futility, lust, and anger reveal the why behind your current unwanted sexual behavior. These are the stories that await your engagement. Although sexual brokenness may have long seemed like an impediment to cultivating a spiritual life, it can be the very means God uses to transform you into the person you've always wanted to be.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Recall a time you pursued unwanted sexual behavior when you weren't caring well for yourself.
- What is the primary way you dissociate? Does it serve as a "gateway drug" to your pursuit of unwanted sexual behavior?
- Write down your two or three most prevalent sexual fantasies. What do you think they might be communicating?
- What area of your life do you feel the greatest lack of purpose in? How will you pursue integrity and maturity within that area?
- Think of a time when you found yourself pursuing lust after you were angry with some person or event.

- If you are a woman, recall a time when you experienced the sexual entitlement or anger of men.

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[54] Gus Turner, "After the Cavaliers Lost the NBA Finals, Cleveland Fans Watched a Lot of Porn," *Men's Health*, June 16, 2017, https://www.menshealth.com/sex-women/cleveland-cavaliers-fans-porn-nba-finals-pornhub.

[55] I am indebted to Dan Allender for this insight that I learned as a senior fellow at the Allender Center.

[56] Melissa Farley, Julie Bindel, and Jacqueline M. Golding, *Men Who Buy Sex: Who They Buy and What They Know* (Eaves, London: Prostitution Research and Education, 2009), https://i1.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2012/04/MenWhoBuySex-89396b.pdf. This research shows that about one-half of the study participants (54 percent) said that they were currently in a relationship. Other research from N. McKeganey found that 66 percent of buyers in Glasgow, Scotland, were married or living with a sexual partner. See N. McKeganey, "Why Do Men Buy Sex and What Are Their Assessments of the HIV-Related Risks When They Do?" *AIDS Care* 6, no. 5 (1994): 289–301.

[57] This lust and anger section is based on an article I wrote with Covenant Eyes: Jay Stringer, "Faith Leaders: When We Blame Lust, We Intensify Sexual Sin," Covenant Eyes, March 5, 2018, http://www.covenanteyes.com/2018/03/05/blaming-lust-intensifies-sexual-sin/.

[58] *NAS Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries*, s.v. "epithumeó," accessed March 13, 2018, http://biblehub.com/greek/1937.htm.

[59] Dan B. Allender, *The Healing Path: How the Hurts in Your Past Can Lead You to a More Abundant Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 1999), 52.

[60] Julie Ruvolo, "How Much of the Internet Is Actually for Porn," *Forbes*, September 7, 2011, https://www.forbes.com/sites/julieruvolo/2011/09/07/how-much-of-the-internet-is-actually-for-porn/#579195935d16.

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CHAPTER NINE

THREE HIJACKERS OF OUR SOULS

GOD KNEW FULL WELL WHAT SORT OF power sexual arousal would release in the world when it was designed. Therefore, the hijacking of our sexual lives for destructive purposes should not be confused with their inherent goodness. The key drivers we explored in part 1—such as triangulation, disengagement, and abuse—are the origins of how our sexual lives become increasingly vulnerable to being hijacked. What we will explore now is how terrorists of resignation, perversion, and degradation calculatingly execute their plans.

No one ever wakes up and says, “I’m willing to resign my sexual life to perversion and degradation.” Most of us, however, find that the longer we remain in unwanted behavior, the more hijacked our experience with it becomes. When the ability to maintain authority over our sexual stories is compromised, the more despair we will experience.

Most often, our sexual lives are hijacked in three areas: futility is hijacked by resignation, lust is hijacked by perversion, and anger is hijacked by degradation. As we explore these three hijackers, we will journey into the deepest parts of the swamp from which you may believe there is no escape. What I trust that you will find is that you do not need to manufacture hope to get out of this quagmire; rather, hope exists in the very dregs of your heartache. The honesty and courage that have carried you this far have prepared you for the hardest part of our journey together.

Resignation: Hijacked Futility

As a woman, I feel as though I resist forms of violence all day. With porn, I just resign to it.
VICTORIA

My wife doesn't like sex, so yeah, I am going to mess up occasionally.
AARON

Each of these statements reveals a soul hijacked by resignation. The word *resign* is taken from the Latin *resignare*, meaning to unseal or cancel.[61] When we resign to unwanted sexual behavior, we are canceling, unsealing, our commitments to being men and women of integrity. When futility goes unaddressed, it will eventually taunt us with the message that nothing can be done to change our situations. When we attempt to change, we may even hear ourselves say, "There is too much sexual brokenness behind me to overcome. I am unwanted and beyond repair." Rather than transform this toxic message, we find it easier to collude with it. Our lives are hijacked each time we choose indifference with the things that matter.

Your first experiences with resignation may not be overtly sexual. Instead, they come in the form of a third drink, binge watching your favorite shows, and gradually falling behind at work. These experiences are often the gateway drugs that either lower our defenses or increase our frustration. Unaddressed, they propel us into unwanted sexual behavior. Within a study of 932 people struggling with compulsive sexual behavior, 42 percent reported chemical dependency, and 38 percent reported an eating disorder.[62] Resignation is like compounding interest on a loan: It starts small and swells with time.

Explicit pornography is the tip of the iceberg for our collective lust for content that allows us to escape our lives and deadens our desire. Debra Hirsch, author of *Redeeming Sex*, wrote,

> No one would blink an eye at a woman bringing a *Women's Day* into church, yet there would be an uproar if a man arrived with a *Playboy* under his arm! Aren't both types of magazines

> pornographic? I put women's magazines into the category of "social porn," because they can be just as damaging for women as "soft porn" can be for men. Think of all the faulty notions of beauty it breeds, the covetousness it generates, not to mention the gossip that ensues. . . . Porn is porn, no matter what form it comes in.[63]

Hirsch is helping us acknowledge that in the heart of every man and woman is a desire for a version of pornography. Think about the spectrum of pornography as the difference between smoke and carbon monoxide. We've been trained to set up smoke alarms in our hearts for unwanted sexual behavior. This alerts us to the most obvious forms of danger: the smoke of explicit pornography or the first date of an affair. "Social porn" and other forms of thoughtless content are the carbon monoxide. It may seem odorless and colorless, but it leads to the same poisoning of passion and purpose.

The goal of the evil one within resignation is propagation. Evil is never content with futility in one sphere of life; it wants to invade all of them, particularly the places that hold the greatest potential for beauty. I do not believe that the kingdom of darkness cares terribly much whether futility starts with our sexual behavior or our careers or our families. It knows that when we resign in one area, our defenses in all other areas will follow suit. When the pattern of resignation is established, we find ourselves conceding to sexual stories we never would have wanted. The advancement is brutal and yet so simple.

Abby, a graphic designer, entered therapy because of a lifelong battle with pornography. "What I've come to realize about my life is that anytime I try to resist sexual temptation, it only comes back stronger. I eventually just got tired of fighting it and resigned to the fact that it's less maddening to give in. I used to hook up with men because it felt exciting. Now I seek out men when I'm feeling terrible about who I am." People like Abby often

resign to sexually acting out not because they love sex but because they are bound to the judgment of self-contempt. In describing why they pursue sex or pornography, they use such words as *crazy*, *nymph*, and *mentally ill*.

Strip responsibility and reciprocity from sex, and you have pornography. For this reason, many men like Daryl resign to the belief that pornography is one of the best dimensions of their lives. “Porn is the ultimate VIP experience!” Pornography is appealing because all that is required is to show up feeling defeated, angry, lustful, or entitled and be promptly served any erotic content you desire. In pornography, there is no one you must encounter in your ongoing struggle with premature ejaculation, no pain in not being chosen by a partner, no one who will ask for emotional engagement, and no one who will hold you to account for having endured the distorted desires of your heart.

Men and women often wait until crises before they confront their resignation to unwanted sexual behavior. When I meet these clients, they often shed tears as they name the insidious role of resignation. For some, the breaking point was their entrance into hard-core or child pornography. For others, it was their choice to solicit prostitution, and for others, it was the choice to begin an affair. These are heartbreaking yet remarkable sessions to witness. Their grief is the fire that thaws the frozen sea within.

Those who struggle the most to transform their sexual lives, however, are not those who have fallen the hardest; it is those who have learned how to resign to small doses of unwanted sexual behavior over a lifetime. They have resigned not to sexual extremity but to the occasional sexual struggle. Most often, they curate sexual struggles that likely will not cost them relationships or careers. The point is not to explode their lives but to slowly deaden their hearts’ ability to believe that meaningful change could ever come. If you want to know why you’ve resigned to unwanted sexual behavior, find out what life events convinced you that hope is pointless.

Resignation derails you from the necessary work of maturity. I do not believe the kingdom of darkness cares terribly much whether you drift off to pornography yearly, monthly, or nightly. It knows that once you’ve

resigned to small doses of toxins in your heart, your potential to enjoy the fullness of life is compromised.

Perversion: Hijacked Lust

If I hadn't been caught by my wife, I think I would have been arrested at some point because the porn I started looking at was getting really horrible.
ANDY

The word *perversion* is taken from the Latin word *pervertere*, meaning to turn around.[64] When we talk about sexual perversion, we are referring to forms of sex and fantasy that have been turned around, spoiled from the original goodness God created. In Jewish tradition, a man will take the Vow of Onah on his wedding day. Marriage and family therapist Dr. Tina Sellers has noted ten instructions within this vow that are of extreme relevance to our culture today. For our discussion on perversion, let's highlight three of these instructions related to sexual intimacy:

1. Sex is considered a woman's right, not a man's (the husband is to ensure that all forms of sexual touch are pleasurable for her).
2. Sex for selfish personal satisfaction without regard for the partner's pleasure is wrong and considered evil.
3. Sexual touch and intercourse were to be celebrated in joy and not in sadness, anger, disinterest, or self-interest.

The Vow of Onah offers a sexual ethic needed in our day. Think about what happens in our culture and marriages when sex is considered to be a man's right, when it's used without ensuring that all forms of sexual touch are pleasurable, or when it is used in anger or self-interest. Used in these ways, sex enters the spectrum of perversion; it turns sex away from intimacy in favor of entitlement.

Dr. Robert Stoller, who was a psychiatry professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, believed that perversion was "the result of an essential interplay between hostility and sexual desire."[65] Stoller theorized that pornography and other sexual fantasies are vehicles that allow childhood trauma to be transformed symbolically into sexual power. He says that "at [pornography's] heart is a fantasied act of revenge, condensing in itself the subject's sexual life history—his memories and fantasies, traumas, frustrations, and joys. There is always a victim, no matter how disguised: no victim, no pornography."[66]

Whereas lust is characterized by a frenetic desire to consume someone or something, perversion is driven by hostility. Few women and men I've worked with initially own the hostility in their unwanted sexual behavior. Instead, they say they are frustrated or lonely. But then they tell of being angry and upset with their partners, such as the case of a man who is angry at his partner for not wanting sex and uses porn after she falls asleep or the case of a woman who senses how devoted her husband is to his career and in response begins an affair with her husband's college friend. Perversion occurs through associating sexual lust with the anger embedded in our hearts.

According to popular pornography sites, each time men log on to the sites, they spend on average about nine minutes using pornography. Nine minutes. Women spend about a minute more. It strikes me that if we truly longed for beauty, connection, enjoyment, and pleasure as much as people claimed, we would be spending far more time pursuing it. The evidence suggests something to the contrary. We pursue pornography not because we are pursuing beauty but precisely because we prefer to consume and control it. With time, pornography will become a form of restitution in which we demand that the object of our lust suffer the loneliness, anger, and confusion we do not know how to suffer.

Danny's marriage was in a difficult spot when he decided to talk to his pastor about his pornography struggle. Danny's wife had a history of sexual abuse and found herself either avoiding or disinterested in sex. He wanted

to be connected to his wife but soon found that attempts to initiate sex or intimacy would be met with resistance and disappointment. “It felt easier to just turn off my desire for my wife. When I left it on, I walked around so angry at her and her past for dictating our intimacy.”

Danny managed this disappointment for several years, until his wife made the decision to go back to school. Although they had a marriage that was largely without sex, they found ways to create intimacy and diminish loneliness when they were together. All that changed when Danny’s wife started taking night classes. He found himself more depressed and as unmotivated as ever. He remarked, “I never thought it would be that hard. I would come home from work, and I would be alone for three hours a couple of times a week. The old feelings returned, and the need to be connected, the desire for sex, and the anger that my marriage, which was supposed to offer these things, was completely impotent to fulfill them.” For the first time since college, Danny began using pornography.

The pornography he sought out had to do with a genre that involves younger men having sex with their friend’s mothers. The scene typically involves the man being home alone when a friend’s mom “randomly” visits him. The male actor is often lonely in the scene but aroused by the mom’s pursuit and flirtation. Danny found himself increasingly seduced by these types of videos and felt an entitled energy rise up within him to have an older woman offer him what he was missing out on. What he began to address with his pastor was the loneliness and hurt that had been present throughout his life. He wept when he saw how much his good desire for connection had been hijacked and perverted by a hostile pursuit of pornography.

If you wish to stop your perversion, learn to *listen to your lust*. When you pay attention to it at a deeper level, sexual perversion can become your road map to healing. Studying the specifics of your perversion will help you gain a sense of what you are truly seeking. For example, men like Danny

who develop sexual fantasies in which women hold the power—be that an attractive mother figure, an employer, or someone older—tend to have a fairly predictable story.

MEN WHO FANTASIZE ABOUT WOMEN WITH POWER
ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE DEALING WITH
DEPRESSION
HISTORY OF SEXUAL ABUSE
HAVING FATHERS WHO CONFIDED IN THEM

Danny's path to healing involved the recognition that he did not really know who he was. His depression was a symptom of this purposelessness. He was okay when his wife was around, because her presence allowed him to avoid learning how to develop into an individuated person. He later said, "I would never want the harm of pornography to reenter my family. But oh man, it showed me so much about how little I knew who I was, how little I knew how to pursue what I needed, how little I knew how to confront difficulty. I'd never say I was grateful for it, but God sure did use it to give me a life."

Degradation: Hijacked Anger

I am worried I am going to become a monster. It used to be that I could separate porn from relationships. Now I am not so sure.

KEVIN

I'm not ready to tell you everything, but it's just so evil.

BRITTANY

Let me state unequivocally that I believe that pornography exists predominantly due to male violence against women. When masculine anger is sexually hijacked, it moves into degradation of the feminine. The origins of the word *degrade* involve reducing someone to a lower rank, particularly to punish someone. Although the use of pornography may involve the curiosity to see the beauty of the female body, it will move to a hijacked desire to see women subservient to demands. Degradation functions on a spectrum. On one end is reducing a woman to less than a man, in which she quickly becomes a sex object; on the other end, a woman's body is defaced and punished in overt sexual violation.

The fantasy world created in pornography or prostitution requires a woman to be reduced to an object or commodity. In pornography, a woman's rank as a co-revealer of the image of God is reduced to a gender that exists to submissively serve the errant longings of men. This is why you have likely seen an escalation in severity of the pornography you watch. You may have started with a lingerie or swimsuit catalog, but pornography moves toward greater exposure, more loss of innocence, more subservience, more women, and ultimately more degradation.

Pornographers know that men move from hearts of lust to demands to possess beauty and, if they stay long enough, to the desire to see the bodies and faces of women degraded. The heartbeat of the pornographic world is to seduce men through their lust in order to offer them the ability to deface the beauty and life-giving power of women.

Pornography exposes one of the tragic dimensions of the heart of a man: his violence. The problem of male sexual entitlement and anger is a malignant though often overlooked issue. The #metoo movement was proclaimed to the nations precisely because it named what most faith leaders consistently miss: the misuse of power, control, and anger in the sexual lives of men. Although the church should be on the front lines of exposing male violence against women, it has been largely silent.

Men need to rapidly wake up to the systemic issue of our sexual violation of women. For example, we talk about the number of women who are sexually harmed but say next to nothing about the number of *men* who sexually harm women.[67] We refer to women, even teenagers, as sluts and whores but refer to men as lonely, johns, and horny. Language reveals not only how far men distance themselves from the problem but also where they truly place the blame for sexual brokenness. Jackson Katz, author and renowned cultural commentator, wrote,

> We talk about how many women were raped last year, not about how many men raped women. We talk about how many girls in a school district were harassed last year, not about how many boys harassed girls. We talk about how many teenage girls in the state of Vermont got pregnant last year, rather than how many men and boys impregnated teenage girls. . . . Even the term "violence against women" is problematic. It's a passive construction; there's no active agent in the sentence.[68]

If male violence against women is prevalent in our intimate relationships and in our schools and organizations, surely it is metastasizing in the underground world of pornography as well.

One of the most surprising findings in my research was that women sought out more aggressive, violent, and degrading forms of pornography. Women pursued porn that featured bondage and rough or aggressive sex at a higher rate than men.

Former Google data scientist and Harvard-trained economist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz also found this trend. He wrote, “If there is a genre of porn in which violence is perpetrated against a woman, my analysis of the data shows that it almost always appeals disproportionately to women.”[69]

I was shocked by these findings, until I began seeing them through the lens of male power and violence against women. The overwhelming key driver for female fantasies of aggression and violence was the desire to see someone else have more power over them. This included a desire to see someone older than they are, situations in which they were the less powerful one, and scenarios that made them feel as if they were being used.

There is a tremendous amount of mystery and complexity to female arousal, and I make no attempt to definitively state a conclusion for why women pursue sexual violence in pornography at greater numbers than men. That said, there does appear to be an association between the sexual violation girls and women undergo and the pornography they later seek out. Research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that approximately one out of four girls will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen,[70] and in one study of nine schools, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) found that one out of five women (21 percent) was sexually assaulted after entering college.[71] Additionally, the average age of introduction to pornography is now between eight and eleven years of age.

These statistics give us a window into how men and women pursue violent pornography for different purposes. Whereas men tend to pursue pornography to find *power over* their shame and harm, women tend to pursue violent pornography to *repeat* their shame and harm. Our choice of pornography reveals the stories not only of the harm we endured but of the ways we attempt to reverse or repeat these dynamics in the present. The tragedy is that either pursuit ends in the degradation of women.

Evil seduces us to degradation to eclipse the greater God-given longings in our hearts. Pornography offers us an imitation version of the justice and rest found in Jesus alone. In pornography, a victim is chosen to suffer violation in order to offer the porn user revenge and escape. In the gospel, humanity chooses an innocent victim to suffer death. In Jesus' atonement, we are paradoxically offered the justice and rest we most desire. Both pornography and Jesus appeal to the deepest longings in our hearts. Only one offers freedom.

We can see, then, the effective idolatry taking place in pornography use. Rather than accepting the willing self-sacrifice of a God who offers to atone for our sins, we seek out an alternative sacrifice—a victim both unwilling and inadequate—and bring our lust and anger there instead. Rather than submit ourselves to a loving God, we have submitted ourselves to (and implicated ourselves in) evil.

Healing is one of the primary ways we take back the ground that evil attempted to steal. Such healing requires confronting our pursuits of degradation. Men need the honesty to name the ways they've misused their power, specifically in the harm of women. Women need the honesty to confront that much of their pull toward the degradation of pornography was driven by the abuse of men. For many women, honesty is an issue of naming how much of their sexual stories were unwanted and pursuing sexual stories that bear honor, beauty, and choice.

Unwanted Sexual Behavior: The Movie

Now that we have explored the six foundational experiences of unwanted sexual behavior and the three ways our sexual lives become hijacked, let's see this film roll from start to finish. I will introduce you to a man named Chandler, a senior pastor of a church in the Midwest. I have highlighted his experiences in parentheses at the end of important sentences.

Prior to therapy, Chandler would have said he was born in a godly home. He recognizes now that the story is more complicated. Chandler's dad was a construction contractor, and a pretty successful one. He put food on the table, attended Chandler's games, and made time for the whole family to be together. Chandler told about the most glaring reality about his father: "I never had the sense my dad really liked my mom. He rarely enjoyed her and would criticize her for almost any decision she made. I was really sensitive to that. Somehow I knew that part of my task was to be a good son and become the type of man my dad could never be for my mom."

Chandler's mom was playful but hurting. Even though she never said so, he could tell she was struggling. What makes Chandler a remarkable pastor is also what led him to pornography: "I learned how to see and meet other people's needs well, but I never learned how to address my own" (deprivation and triangulation).

In middle school, Chandler discovered that his dad had a descrambler on the television in the basement. It was a device that would allow him to see channels that were normally scrambled, notably Cinemax and The Playboy Channel (arousal—also notice his father's deliberate choice to allow pornography into the home). One weekend, Chandler had a sleepover with friends and introduced them to pornography. Chandler recalls what happened when his dad came down the stairs: "My heart was beating so fast, and my dad, cool as ever, just said, 'Chandler, I need to talk with you.' We walked into the laundry room, and he said, 'I don't want you watching that stuff with your friends around. You need to apologize to them and keep the TV off the rest of the night.'" Chandler remembered feeling so relieved and confused. His father was not angry but was giving him permission to do what he wanted in private. "I didn't need to fight it anymore. It was so

strange, but I was angry that he was not angry" (resignation and anger). It did not even occur to Chandler until therapy that his father was also addicted to pornography.

In seminary, Chandler experienced a lot of victory and healing with pornography. He did not want to be seduced by things that brought shame; he wanted his conscience to be clean. He met his wife in the last year of seminary, and six years later they had three kids. Chandler grew a young-adult ministry to more than five hundred people, and within a few years the church leadership was talking to him off record about becoming the senior pastor. "I wanted the position so badly, and I began talking about how out of touch the senior pastor was with the up-and-coming generation" (lust). Within two years, Chandler was hired as the new senior pastor. Life was beautiful and meaningful.

Becoming a senior pastor was the best and worst thing that ever happened to Chandler. The growth of his church became his sole focus. He notes, "When I got into this role as the senior pastor, I stopped caring for myself. I used to jog and go to the gym a few times a week, but my schedule intensified after my promotion. I was quickly adapting to the new normal of this role: crisis. It got to be too much for me. I needed to preach forty-five-plus times a year, grow a church, and run a staff of almost one hundred people. There were some things I did well, but some things I was completely failing in [deprivation and futility]. My wife and kids wanted more from me, and I resented them for it" (anger).

Chandler's first use of pornography as a pastor occurred when he was alone in his office late on a Friday afternoon. Almost all of his staff had left for the day, and he was attempting to finish a sermon he had no desire to preach (futility). He logged on to Facebook and spent a half hour scrolling through his timeline (dissociation). Chandler clicked on the profile of a woman he'd had a crush on in high school. He found himself wondering what life would have been like if he had not been a pastor but instead had pursued a normal job as her husband appeared to have (dissociation).

The moment it occurred to him he did not want to be a pastor, he felt an incredible desire to see pornography. Chandler turned his phone off Wi-Fi, went into a private bathroom, locked the door, and masturbated to pornography (arousal and dissociation).

Chandler felt immense amounts of shame afterward but dismissed his mistake as a fluke. He prayed, asked God for forgiveness, and then returned home to watch a movie with his wife. “I felt as if I wanted to tell her or someone that I was tired and wanted something else for my life. I buried that feeling and thought it would eventually pass” (deprivation). Three weeks later, Chandler was back in his office on a Friday evening when he decided to repeat his previous mistake (arousal and resignation).

As the months went on, Chandler felt increased amounts of resentment for all that his church and family required from him (anger). He picked apart his wife for every decision she made and openly devalued other pastors in staff meetings for their incompetence (anger). Chandler felt trapped in his job and trapped in his growing involvement in unwanted sexual behavior (futility). The worst night of Chandler’s pastoral ministry was being in a private family bathroom looking at pornography that repulsed him (perversion and degradation). “I was so ashamed. It was content I never thought I would ever be aroused by. I was a hypocrite, but my shame drove me deeper into my perversion. When I wasn’t feeling terrible, I felt numb. I spent more time on Facebook, reading blogs, really anything to distract myself from where I was in life” (dissociation).

It was at this time that Chandler started using his work computer to look at pornography. “It was as if I let myself off the hook. I knew that if I looked on my work computer, the IT department would find out and my job would be in jeopardy. I thought about fighting it, but I gave in, thinking it really wouldn’t matter if I were eventually going to stop being a pastor [futility and resignation]. I stopped caring about what would happen to me. I was waiting for something to explode. Then one Tuesday morning in March an elder knocked on my door and said, ‘The church is going to have you take a couple of months off. We need to talk.’”

My hope is that reading Chandler's story prompts a more honest and courageous engagement of your own experiences, in which you annotate and name aspects you've long avoided. These six experiences and their hijacked forms are the constructs that answer the question "Why do I stay?" The work required to dismantle the experiences is intensely unrelenting. Though it pains me to say this, they are only part of the battle. But these elements within you are not merely self-perpetuating; they are influenced by the systems that surround you.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Recall a time when you allowed yourself to resign to unwanted sexual behavior. What was happening in your life at the time (e.g., isolation, trying and failing at every treatment approach, etc.)?
- In what ways does your unwanted sexual behavior offer you escape and revenge?
- Have you ever had a moment where you noticed something inside you wanting to use or be used in a way that bears aggression?
- If you are a woman, where have you experienced forms of sexual coercion from men? When was the first time? The latest?

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[61] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary: Luxury Edition*, 12th ed. (2011), s.v. "resign." ("From L. *resignare* 'unseal, cancel'.")

[62] Patrick Carnes, *Don't Call It Love: Recovery from Sexual Addiction* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 35.

[63] Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 77.

[64] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed. (2018), s.v. "peevish," accessed March 13, 2018, https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=peevish. ("Possibly from Latin *perversus*, turned the wrong way, perverse, past participle of pervertere, to turn around, corrupt.")

[65] Robert Stoller, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (London: Karnac, 1986), xi.

[66] Stoller, *Perversion*, 64–65.

[67] Thought credit to Jackson Katz. For more on this topic, see Katz's TED Talk, "Violence against Women—It's a Men's Issue," 17:37, November 2012, TEDxFiDiWomen, https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue/transcript.

[68] NiamhNic, "I hadn't thought about this much before," Twitter, October 15, 2017, https://twitter.com/NiamhNic.

[69] Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, *Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us about Who We Really Are* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 121. Women searched such terms as *force*, *brutal*, and others far more graphic.

[70] "Understanding Child Sexual Abuse," *American Psychological Association*, December 2011, http://www.apa.org/pi/about/newsletter/2011/12/sexual-abuse.aspx.

[71] Christopher Krebs, Christine Lindquist, Marcus Berzofsky, Bonnie Shook-Sa, and Kimberly Peterson, *Campus Climate Survey Validation Study Final Technical Report*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Research and Development Series, 73.

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CHAPTER TEN

THE SEX INDUSTRY

Pornography as Male Violence against Women

UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR is shaped not only by your personal story but also by our culture. Although it's critical to understand the apparatus of your personal struggle, I would be remiss to not zoom out to unveil at least one of the wider forces and systems that work tirelessly to keep your unwanted sexual behavior in place. We are living, arguably, in a time unparalleled in human history with the availability and normalization of erotic and violent sexual content. In other generations, rape and sexual consumption may have been tactics an enemy used when your empire or tribe was conquered, but never could an eleven-year-old google a gang-rape video, or a seven-year-old be targeted by a pornographer's typosquatting, which lures unsuspecting children to pornographic sites based on a child's common misspellings or typos.

You interact with systemic forces consciously and unconsciously every day. The ubiquity and hidden dimensions of these systems must be understood, because even your most rigorous efforts to refrain from unwanted behavior could be sidelined by their power. Transformation requires that you hold the rope taut between knowing your story and anticipating the influence of these systems. To only address one dimension leaves you vulnerable to the other.

There are many other systems, such as the prevalence of media and the hypocrisy of the church, that contribute to reinforcing your sexual struggles. But for the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on the one system that I

have observed my clients interacting with the most throughout their recovery process: the sex industry.

Before we dive in, let's quickly recognize that the sex industry is so alluring because of what the addiction treatment community refers to as the 3 As:

- *A*nonymity
- *A*ffordability
- *A*vailability

Think for a moment about how this relates to the sex industry's content. Most people believe that their Internet searches are *anonymous*, and therefore they are uninhibited in their sexual indulgence. An Internet connection may require a monthly bill, but this is relatively *affordable*, especially when you consider how necessary the service is for other areas of your life. And finally, the Internet is *available* to us twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There is almost nothing in the world that is as constant and accessible as the ability to check our e-mail, update Facebook, or pursue pornography.

Anonymity, affordability, and availability reveal how ineffective a mere desire to stop your unwanted sexual behavior would be. Forces you may not even be aware of are at work against you. To counteract these forces, heart change and practical actions will need to be pursued. Some people choose to exchange their smartphones for flip phones, some ask a friend to join them in using an Internet accountability software such as Covenant Eyes to monitor and filter pornographic content, and others join twelve-step or therapy groups to be less anonymous. These actions will not necessarily reduce your draw toward unwanted sexual behavior. Instead, they create barriers to keep the waters of sexual content from drowning you as you seek to rebuild the foundations of your life.

Let me be clear that the sex industry is never ultimately to blame for your involvement with unwanted sexual behavior. Instead, it functions much like a squatter in a vacant home. If you are not committed to taking responsibility for the integrity of your life, there are many squatters who will be glad to take over.

There is a deep, inextricable connection between the world of pornography and prostitution (also referred to as commercial sexual exploitation). Many of the women involved in the porn industry will also experience commercial sexual exploitation. Pornography use is more prevalent in Christian circles than buying sex. This is, of course, because of the dimensions of availability and anonymity but equally because of how easy it is to draw artificial lines in the sand showing which behavior is worse than the next. These types of distinctions blind us from seeing that our self-righteousness, just as much as the world's unrighteousness, is responsible for the ongoing state of sexual brokenness around us. What I've learned is that in studying prostitution, we see with more clarity and precision what is involved in the demand for and consumption of pornography.

A Trip to the Other Side of the World

Several years ago, I flew to Seoul, South Korea, to visit my brother, who was teaching English. We were in a bar one night and ended up sitting next to a table of men from the United States and the United Kingdom. We ended up conversing, and they asked me what type of work I was involved in back in Seattle. I told them about my therapy practice, and unsolicited, they each went on to tell me about the sex they purchased in South Korea and Southeast Asia.

I was astounded by what I heard. Each man spoke to seeing a deadness in the eyes of the women and teenagers that they had purchased sex from. One particularly honest man told me he went to a small village in Thailand where he was treated like a king. He was given access to any woman or

child he desired. He put it like this: “I remember thinking, *Who have I become?* It started with a fantasy of having sex in Thailand, and by the end of my trip, I was doing horrible things I swore I would never do in my life.”

By the time I left South Korea, I had heard story after story of men who had given in to their hijacked desires. The more they did, the more they experienced internal and external alienation. They described feeling as if their consciences had been marred by their behavior, with a few even experiencing waves of nausea in recalling their actions with the women and girls they commercially exploited. My time in South Korea cornered me with the reality that our battle is not solely against the flesh and blood of personal sexual brokenness but against the powers and principalities of this world that delight in seeing God’s gift of sex debased. Seeing beyond the petri dish of our own stories, we see the entitlement of predominantly heterosexual men that necessitated the need for the #metoo movement, the realities of children being sex trafficked, and the sex industry’s goal to eroticize the degradation of women. We live in a world of sexual violation.

Sexual violation will be healed to the extent to which it is acknowledged. This is why it is critical to find a holistic diagnosis of the sexual madness of our time. The diagnosis must include lust, personal-trauma history, and present-day futility, but it must also address the at times deplorable dimension of the human condition. Judith Herman, professor of clinical psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, wrote,

> The desire for control over another person is the common denominator of all forms of tyranny. Totalitarian governments demand confession and political conversion of their victims. Slaveholders demand gratitude of their slaves. Religious cults demand ritualized sacrifices as a sign of submission to the divine will of the leader. Perpetrators of domestic battery demand that their victims prove complete obedience and loyalty by sacrificing all other relationships. Sex offenders demand that their victims find sexual fulfillment in submission. Total control over another

> person is the power dynamic at the heart of pornography. The erotic appeal of this fantasy to millions of terrifyingly normal men fosters an immense industry in which women and children are abused, not in fantasy but in reality.[72]

Herman speaks to the heart of the demand issue with stunning honesty. She invites us to abandon the perspective that women in pornography are simply participating in an enjoyable career and instead see that the sex industry demands total control over the bodies of women and children in order to produce its content. It is men who must decide whether to accept a world that will continually demand the sexual degradation and possession of women.

Violence against women is an issue of not only individual perversion but also justice. Our collective demand for this material fuels an industry in which women and children suffer violence and death in order to deliver men the corrupted desires of their hearts. Our wounds invite us to the gentle path of healing, but our perversions challenge us by asking, *Is violence against women the way we wish to atone for these traumas?* As Franciscan priest Richard Rohr said, "'*If you do not transform your pain, you will always transmit it.*' Always someone else has to suffer because *I* don't know how to suffer; that is what it comes down to."[73]

Crimes against Women

Historically, men attempted to portray prostitution and pornography as victimless. The underlying foundation of this belief is that women exist to serve the needs of men. Our language to refer to a sex buyer has classically been the word *john*, meaning any man. On the other hand, the language we use for women and children trapped in sexual exploitation is more derogatory: *whore*, *ho*, *prostitute*, *tramp*, and the list goes on. The message is clear: Buying sex is common for all men, but the real gender to blame for this issue is women.

The statistics are overwhelming for women in the life of prostitution and pornography. Approximately 90 percent of these women have suffered sexual abuse, and the average age of initial involvement in prostitution is somewhere in the range of fourteen to eighteen, which in many cases is lower than the age of consent in the United States. There is something seriously wrong when we blame those in prostitution for their lifestyles, when legally they are not even old enough to give their consent for sex. This is rape.

Additionally, 58 percent of American prostitutes will report violent assaults at the hands of clients. As you might imagine, the great majority of sexual assaults go unreported. Sadly, 92 percent of women in prostitution report a desire to leave the life but cannot due to not having enough food or money. The homicide rate among women actively engaged in prostitution is seventeen times higher than the rate of females in the general population.[74] And after the review of multiple sources and analyzing nine different data sets, another study concluded that prostituted women "have the highest homicide victimization rate of any set of women ever studied."[75] There is something tremendously wrong yet exposing when sexual "freedom" leads to the rape and murder of women.

Metaphors and Smoke Screens

Sadly, these horrendous realities are not the first things that come to mind when men think about women who have been sexually exploited and mistreated through prostitution and pornography. Instead, many men use language to distance themselves from the rape and entitlement in the violence they commit. Some sex buyers use the language of a sportsman. Online forums to help improve men's experiences with commercially exploited sex workers say things like "Good luck out there and happy hunting" and "Don't overfish this spot" and "Don't abuse this one and send her into hiding—she is a trophy." Other sex buyers refer to women and girls as "meat" and the acts of sex as the various dimensions of a meal: "I like variety, white meat and dark meat. I love it all." Others mention ethnicity

and refer to intercourse: “There was a Thai girl who wanted $150 for the entrée, but I talked her down to $50 because she was more like ground beef than filet mignon.”

Researchers have found that men who buy sex have fairly common expectations and fantasies associated with doing so. The researchers remarked, “To varying degrees, the fantasy entails that men should control the sexual encounter entirely and that prostituted women should appear happy, enthusiastic, and insatiable while serving johns’ sexual needs; the women should make men believe they find johns attractive; the women should appear to care about the men; and the women should appreciate and value johns’ economic ‘help.’”[76]

These examples may seem extreme, particularly if you have never paid for sex. But the same things are true of pornography, which features actresses trained to perform for the appetites of men. This might include acting as if degradation, which will damage their bodies, is erotic or that random and crass strangers are completely irresistible or that they have the best job in the world because all they do all day is have sex. The tragic reality is that these women are deceived into the sex industry through force, fraud, and coercion. Along the way, they also routinely develop sexually transmitted infections, vomit between takes, and profess to their lives being ruined by lost years in the business. Pornography is not any less damaging than street prostitution; it merely distances the user from the debasement and exploitation these women undergo every day. As researcher Melissa Farley noted, “Pornography is pictures of prostitution.”[77]

Common but Unhelpful Rebuttals

When clients or friends open up about pornography they are involved with, what they usually quickly say is something along the lines of “I don’t get into any of that hard-core stuff. I am more into [you fill in the blank].” It could be “just pictures, not videos,” “just consensual couples having sex, not multiple men,” “just webcams of women stripping, not giving oral sex,” “just women I know are over eighteen, not younger ones.” The list goes on.

We contrive these justifications to distance ourselves from the reality that we are using human beings to fill our emptiness (lust) and making them the surrogate objects of our hostility (perversion). Pornography is violence against women, and the sex industry allows us to choose the level of degradation we can tolerate.

My response to these rebuttals is typically one of education and lament for our cultural naiveté regarding sexual violation. Pornography creates a world of sexual illusion, one where we imagine that women are there to serve and enjoy men and become subservient to their longings. Here is the reality, according to researchers who analyzed the content of more than three hundred popular pornography videos:[78]

- 88.2 percent of top-rated porn scenes contain aggressive acts.
- In 70 percent of occurrences, a man is the perpetrator of the aggression; 94 percent of the time, the act is directed toward a woman.
- Only 9.9 percent of the top-selling scenes analyzed contained kissing, laughing, caressing, or verbal compliments.
- Open-hand slapping occurs in 41.1 percent of scenes.
- Sex depicted in porn movies generally focuses on men's sexual pleasure and orgasm rather than women's.

Additionally, porn scenes have sexist and racist themes throughout. Websites often contain menus in which users can select specific categories of women's ethnicities, body types, and ages. Men and women who are anything other than white are represented in stereotypical and demeaning ways. And perhaps most tragically, according to the FBI, child pornography is one of the fastest-growing crimes in the United States. Nationally, there has been a 2,500 percent increase in arrests.

The default response toward the sex industry tends to be one of ambivalence. We know that the content we consume is troubling and negatively affects us, but it becomes so central to our lives that we cannot

imagine being without it. Ambivalence toward the sex industry is a telltale sign that our struggles will not relent in the near future.

The sex industry overrides our contradictory feelings every time. Pornography is not only arousing but also ubiquitous. The sex industry knows that the best way to ensure our continual involvement with the addiction is to provide infinite content (remember the 3As of affordability, anonymity, and availability). Pornography will be seductive to any dimension of our lives lacking a firm foundation.

Understanding the individual and systemic reasons that necessitate your unwanted sexual behavior is a crucial precursor to writing a new sexual story. The focus of the final section of this book will move you from understanding the why behind unwanted sexual behavior to an active transformation of your life, relationships, and community.

Although you may have begun with a desire for a formulaic step-by-step set of techniques, now you can see that such simplistic techniques would fall far short of the lasting freedom you long for and deserve. Mere techniques and formulas rarely produce lasting change, particularly if they were not rooted in the particular stories that formed your involvement with unwanted behavior. In part 1, you examined the map of the world that was handed to you, and in part 2, you explored how you recreated many of these paths as an adult. In part 3, you will find trusted wisdom and practical steps to create a new map that will take you on the journey out of unwanted sexual behavior. This journey begins, as every journey does, with preparation.

FOR REFLECTION:

- In what ways have you seen the sex industry shape your sexual arousal or preferences?

- If you are a man, in what ways have you been complicit in sexual violence against women in our society? Think of a time when you transmitted your pain to women.
- If you are a woman, in what ways might you want to reclaim your sexuality from the influence of the sex industry?

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[72] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic, 1997), 76.

[73] Richard Rohr, *A Lever and a Place to Stand* (New York: Paulist, 2014), https://books.google.com/books?id=fH6dQgs6h4YC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_atb#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[74] John J. Potterat et al., "Mortality in a Long-Term Open Cohort of Prostitute Women," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 159, no. 8 (April 15, 2004): 778–85.

[75] Devon D. Brewer et al., "Extent, Trends, and Perpetrators of Prostitution-Related Homicide in the United States," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 51, no. 5 (August 7, 2006): 1101–8.

[76] Lara Janson et al., "*Our Great Hobby*": *An Analysis of Online Networks for Buyers of Sex in Illinois* (Chicago: Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, 2013), 40, http://www.icasa.org/docs/misc/caase%20report%20online%20buyers%20of%20sex%20in%20illinois.pdf.

[77] Dr. Melissa Farley, presentation at the Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation, Herndon, VA, April 5, 2015.

[78] A. J. Bridges et al., "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update," *Violence against Women* 16, no. 10 (October 2010): 1065–85, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20980228.

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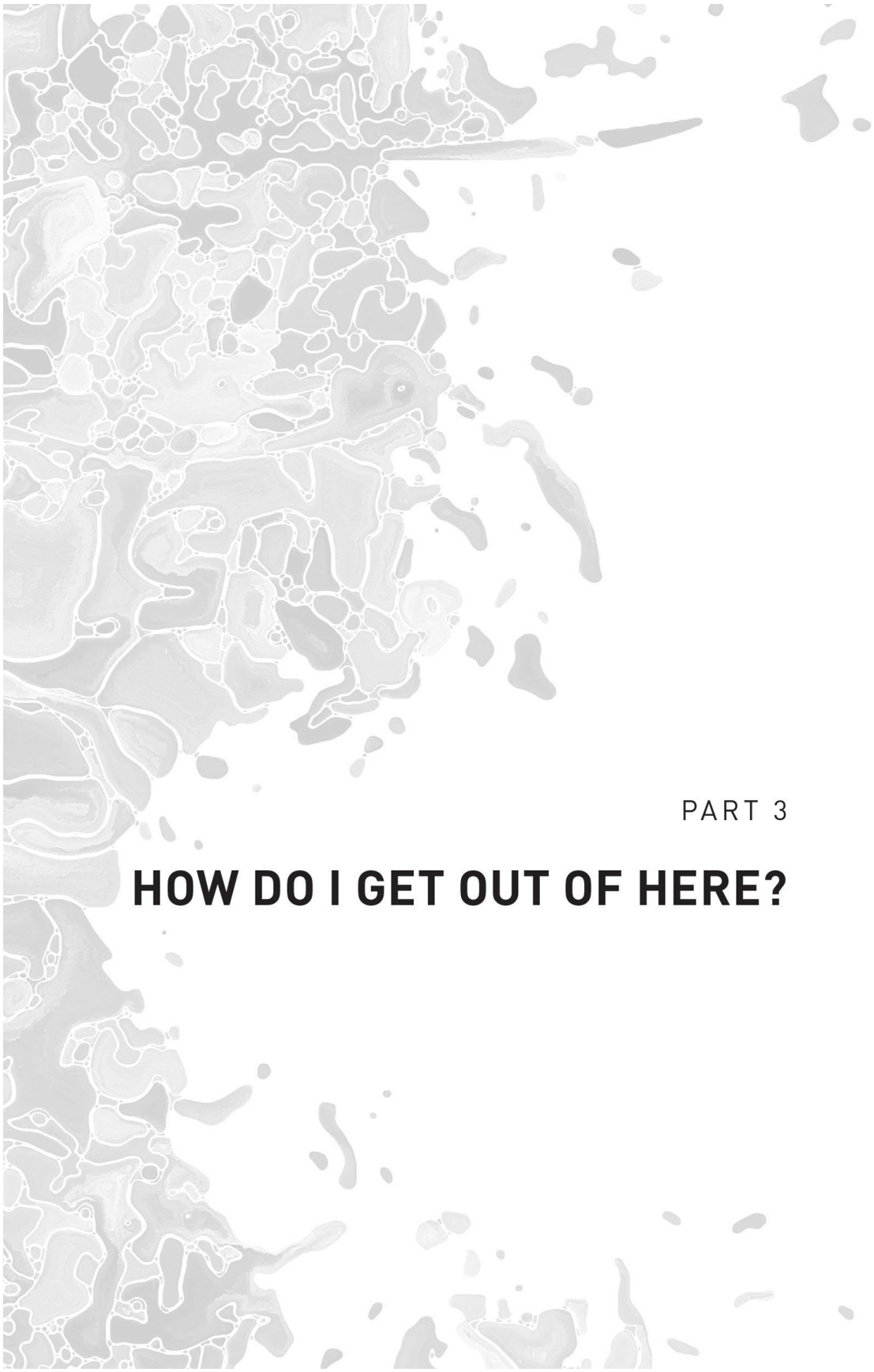

PART 3

HOW DO I GET OUT OF HERE?

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

TRANSFORMING SELF

Learning to Love and Care for Yourself

THIS FINAL SECTION IS LIKELY the reason you bought this book. I hope you can now appreciate why parts 1 and 2 were vital gateways to thinking about a path toward freedom. These sections guided you through a reflective journey of your life and some of the choices, yours and others', that affected your relationship to sex. More than just explaining some of the deeper dynamics at play in unwanted sexual behavior, my intent was to radically disrupt your view of your own story. To ensure you are able to act upon the practical actions that lie ahead, I needed you to consider your choices from dramatically different vantage points than you likely began the book with.

My promise is that freedom from unwanted sexual behavior is indeed possible. I have seen it happen, but never apart from men and women engaging the pain and beauty of their stories. Unwanted sexual behavior eventually becomes a hatred of the hope that exists within us that the holy longings of our hearts could ever be found. The heartaches of our lives and the schemes of evil attempt to convince us that the hope we have is only a daydream. Evil sought to trap us in unwanted sexual behavior to ruin us, but the gospel's great reversal is this: Sexual brokenness reveals our way to healing.

In this chapter, we will address the transformation of self; in the next, we will explore the transformation of your primary relationships, and after that, the transformation of your broader community. Each of these areas influenced your involvement in unwanted sexual behavior, and therefore

freedom will come to the degree to which they are transformed. As you begin the transformation, please know that this is not a one-week, one-month, or even one-year process.

Who you are today is the result of decades of formation, and the best research we have says the best recovery journeys take two to three years for the participant to feel as though he has his life back to a stable place. This does not mean it will be years before you experience sobriety, but it does mean you will need to prepare to navigate the difficulties of life without the use of acting-out behavior. The actions you are about to read are ones I have found to be the most beneficial to the brave men and women who have pursued and found deep transformation.

Preparing for a New Story

Screenwriting coach Robert McKee said,

> When people ask me to help them turn their presentations into stories, I begin by asking questions. I kind of psychoanalyze their companies, and amazing dramas pour out. But most companies and executives sweep the dirty laundry, the difficulties, the antagonists, and the struggle under the carpet. They prefer to present a rosy—and boring—picture to the world. But as a storyteller, you want to position the problems in the foreground and then show how you've overcome them.[79]

What I love about McKee's thoughts is that nothing is wasted, not even the pain. There is no greater defeat of evil than for God to transform its violent schemes into stories that serve our joy. At the end of The Lord of the Rings, all who fought to free Middle-Earth gather in the woods to honor the hobbits. Frodo and Sam, much to their surprise, are placed on a throne to receive the people's words of gratitude. The series' author J. R. R. Tolkien wrote of Frodo and Sam, "Their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to

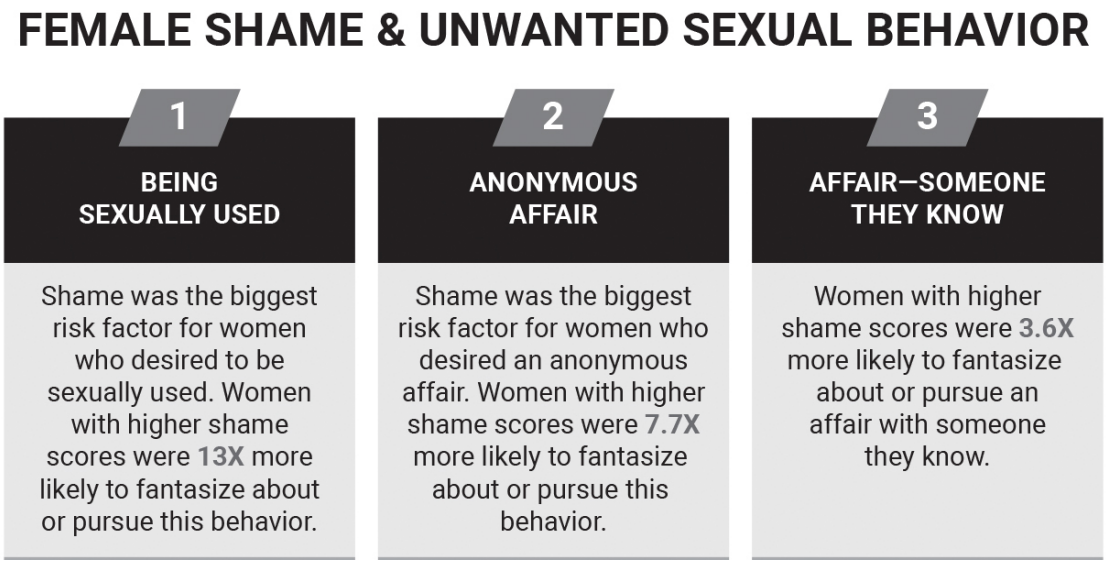
regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness."[80] The pain and struggle you have endured will not be wasted; they will become the very wine of blessedness.

Disarming the Power of Shame

Shame is the painful experience that something you have done or failed to do has made you unwanted or unworthy of belonging. My research found that shame was the most consistent key driver of unwanted sexual behavior. Shame convinces us that we are unwanted, and we pursue behavior that confirms it. To find freedom, disarm the power of shame.

The more you feel shame, the more you pursue pornography. It might sound obvious that shame drives pornography use, but the sheer numbers may alarm you. Men in my sample were nearly 300 times more likely to pursue pornography for each unit of shame they felt about their behavior, and women were 546 times more likely. It has to be said: Shame, not pleasure, drives pornography use.

In addition to pornography, shame was a key predictor for several other prominent types of unwanted sexual behavior. Consider the following two graphics that describe how sexual shame affects men and women:


FEMALE SHAME & UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR
1
BEING SEXUALLY USED
Shame was the biggest risk factor for women who desired to be sexually used. Women with higher shame scores were 13X more likely to fantasize about or pursue this behavior.
2
ANONYMOUS AFFAIR
Shame was the biggest risk factor for women who desired an anonymous affair. Women with higher shame scores were 7.7X more likely to fantasize about or pursue this behavior.
3
AFFAIR—SOMEONE THEY KNOW
Women with higher shame scores were 3.6X more likely to fantasize about or pursue an affair with someone they know.

MALE SHAME & UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

1
BUYING SEX
Men who bought sex were 5X more likely to have higher shame scores.
2
ANONYMOUS AFFAIR
Men who fantasized about or pursued an anonymous affair were nearly 4X more likely to have higher shame scores.
3
AFFAIR—SOMEONE THEY KNOW
Men who fantasized about or pursued an affair with someone they know were 2X more likely to have higher shame scores.

One of the most enjoyable stories I've read in recent years came from an interview with Andy Casagrande, the cameraman of Discovery Channel's notorious show *Shark Week*. Casagrande was asked what in the world he is supposed to do when a great white shark is swimming right at him. He answered that he must do something counterintuitive: swim directly at the shark with the camera. This action seems to trigger a defense mechanism in the shark. "Now they're like, 'Wait a second, everything in the ocean swims away from me.' The reality is that if you don't act like prey, they won't treat you like prey."

Casagrande's statement has a lot to teach us about disarming the power of shame: We should face it. The experience of shame is the biggest predator in our lives, and attempting to outmaneuver our "great white" memories comes naturally to most of us. We swim away from shame each time we downplay the significance of pain, embrace theologies that make amnesia or easy forgiveness of past harm virtuous, and pursue addictive behavior in which we punish our bodies a thousand times over for the cruelty originally committed against us.[81] Herein lies the problem: Shame's power is so often derived from our flight from it. The more we run, the more it pursues us.

The turn toward healing means we set our eyes upon the shark of shame, defying it, disarming it, and demonstrating that it must submit to the paradoxical power of vulnerability. The more we swim in the direction of shame, the more we recognize that our current struggles are often smoke screens, distracting us from the presence of more threatening experiences of it. You may have picked up this book in an attempt to solve a pornography issue but quickly learned there was more swimming around beneath the surface. Shame is certainly a terrifying beast, but each time we choose not to live as its prey, we find it less powerful than we imagined.

The action of facing our shame echoes something God instructed the people of Israel to do when poisonous snakes threatened their civilization in the unpredictable wilderness. The Israelites were homeless, and they were receiving air-dropped rations of food. Terrified of dying and detesting their narrow choices in food and housing, the Israelites began to do what came naturally: They spoke against Moses and God for delivering them into this mess. God's response was to escalate the direness of their situation. The Lord sent poisonous snakes to bite the people of Israel. Corpses of poisoned bodies piled up, and once again the people were distraught. In their horror and helplessness, they recognized that their complaining and slanderous speech about their leaders may have led to their current state of affairs. Moses heard Israel's remorse and petitioned God to heal the people.

God's remedy was simple and almost comical: He had them fashion a bronze snake, plop it on a pole, and have the poisoned Israelites look at it. The story is fairly translucent in its allegory: The Hebrews must look at the very thing that is killing them. The Gospel of John picks up on this story in chapter 3 and recreates the story, but this time it is Jesus who gets placed on a torture stick, and people must look at him in order to be saved.[82] We are healed to the degree to which we can turn to face and name what is killing us.

Turning to face your shame is an incredibly costly yet liberating decision, as you never quite know what stories lie above and beyond the confines of shame. The healing path ahead involves a commitment to

healing the wounds that have marked your life. But that is not all. There is beauty beyond the prison walls of shame. It will cost you all that you have to find it, but it just might give you the very thing you've spent your life wandering to find. The ultimate defeat of shame is when the very experiences that attempted to convince you that you were unwanted become the sources of the greatest joy of being loved.

BENEFITS OF CONFRONTING SHAME

By confronting your shame, you are less susceptible to its power. When you are no longer silenced and disqualified by shame, you allow it to become one of your greatest teachers of redemption. When you confront rather than live as prey to shame, you discover the true victory Jesus has accomplished on your behalf through his defeat of shame and death.

HOW TO DISARM SHAME:

1. Talk to a trusted guide (a therapist, pastor, or sponsor) about the specific stories where you harbor shame. Seldom will you attempt to disclose your shame all at once (though some recovery programs do elect to have it done this way). Instead, disarming shame is about telling the stories that attempt to spoil your identity as beloved. Good guides have training in trauma and unwanted sexual behavior and commit to working to help you discover sexual health freed from shame.
2. Write a story from your childhood about when shame seemed particularly present in your life. After you write it, spend time reflecting on it with a guide. As you reflect on the story, where do you feel it in your body? Did shame occur because you experienced pleasure? Did someone shame you, or were you all alone when something painful occurred? How do you think this story affects you

today? Think of a time when you pursued sexual fantasies or behavior after experiencing shame. Dr. Mark Laaser, one of the Christian leaders in the field of sex addiction, said, “Our fantasies are not things to be ashamed of; they are in fact our greatest teachers.”[83] Allow your sexual fantasies to teach you about the parts of your story that await healing.

3. Continue educating yourself about shame and its association to unwanted sexual behavior. I recommend two books from various perspectives that can help you arrive at a greater understanding of the issues you’re facing. For example, I invite my clients to read *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy*, by Dr. Tina Schermer Sellers, alongside either Dr. Patrick Carnes’s *Out of the Shadows* or Dr. Mark Laaser’s *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction*. Another great resource on shame is *The Soul of Shame*, by Dr. Curt Thompson.

Choose Joy and Develop a Routine of Delight

Perhaps the only helpful lesson I have learned from an airline’s preflight safety instructions is that in the event of an onboard emergency, I should secure my own oxygen mask before securing others’ masks. Essentially, if I cannot breathe, what help am I to anyone else? One of my friends uses this principle with parenting: He must drink one cup of coffee in the morning before commencing his day as a dad. Those who struggle with addictive behavior struggle with deprivation; they tend to ignore issues of self-care. This goes back to your story. If you have known shame and abandonment, you are less likely to believe you deserve good care.

Securing your oxygen is about understanding the things that help you “breathe” and making sure they are established on your calendar and understood in your family. Often when my clients begin to secure their

oxygen, it can kick up a lot for their spouses as they begin to ask, “What about me?” And, of course, they must secure their oxygen too. Partner with one another to make this a reality.

When I took a motorcycle training class a few years ago, the instructor spent the majority of our final day teaching the group how to perform a figure eight. He noted that this maneuver is most commonly where students fail the final test. What students tend to do when they enter the arc at the top or bottom of the eight is look down at the ground. This action, though well intended and natural, ends up dropping them to the asphalt, often with injury. “What you have to do instead is counterintuitive,” the instructor remarked. “If you want to go left, you scoot your butt to the right of your seat and look over your left shoulder. You need to look where you want to go, not where you are.”

The same is true for those who have known lives of addiction. Our natural way of getting through life is to feel chronically behind on tasks, stressed, and ashamed. This is ground we are so accustomed to seeing. What we must learn to do instead is look over our shoulders to find the oxygen we most need. Everything in us will tell us to keep our heads down to the ground of our misery. When we do this, it’s common to hear ourselves say, “I don’t have time” and “I am not worth it.”

Practice a counterintuitive maneuver when you hear negative self-talk, and know that before too long, this will come more naturally for you. Allow yourself to think about where you want to go or what would be good for your body, even if it seems impractical. For instance, in times that I feel particularly busy, I know that my body needs to surf or hike. But the first thing I hear myself say is “That takes too much time. You are really going to leave your wife behind again? If you are going to be busy, you can’t have that, too.”

Negative self-talk makes it so easy to foreclose the good desires within us. Burying our desires builds up storehouses of entitlement. The counterintuitive approach is to lean toward what your heart desires. The needs you and your significant other have do not have to be at odds with

another. Think “and,” not “or.” I will often say to my wife, “I need six hours on Saturday morning to get into the mountains. If I do that, what do you need for the afternoon? I’d love to come back together in the evening to play games with the kids.”

Choose Personal Integrity

Talk of integrity may take you back to those incomplete and inadequate solutions to unwanted sexual behavior that focused on self-limiting practices and accountability to others while neglecting the deep-seated shame and wounds that evil used to corrupt your desire. If the word *integrity* is a hurdle for you, let’s explore an alternative meaning. Integrity is not about fleeing or burying sexual desire; it is concerned with being unified and honest in pursuing the holistic desires within you. Many people I meet truly long for beauty, wholeness, and creativity in their lives. They also know that these dimensions of life require intentional, iterative work. When we encounter adversity, we are prone to compromise the holy longings burgeoning within us. This pull toward compromised desire is at the core of our struggles with integrity.

A failure of integrity does not begin when we look at porn; it begins the moment we begin to care less about the things that matter. When we experience anxiety, we need the *integrity* to work through it rather than flee to our patterned ways of escape. When we want passionate sex lives but sense that our spouses are removed, we need the *integrity* to stay in kind, intentional conversation. When we find ourselves in mundane jobs we dread, we need the *integrity* to pursue the vocation that deeply matters to us. Integrity fortifies all aspects of our lives to pursue the desires, talents, and ambitions God wove into our hearts. Unwanted sexual behavior is not the root cause of a lack of integrity but rather one of the many symptoms.

Anticipate Your Struggles

As we discussed in part 2, sexual fantasies are road maps. These maps will help you anticipate the struggles you will face. Study the predictable times, places, and themes associated with your unwanted sexual behavior. When you do, you will likely find they are predictable. The most common themes I hear about are loneliness, frustration, futility, and boredom, and the most consistent times of acting out are before people go to bed or in the after-lunch energy dip. Journeying out of your unwanted behavior is not about fearing these themes; it is about transforming them into times of rest and even meaning. If you do not have a plan for these times, you will default to your past behavior. Healing is not about simply saying no; it is about saying yes to the good, the true, and the beautiful.

One of my clients, Stanley, recognized that his extensive travel schedule needed to be transformed. He noticed he was taking far more business trips than he actually needed to. “Traveling was like a vacation to me, particularly because of how awful my marriage felt. I needed to have the integrity to address my marriage rather than run from it.” Clients like Stanley recognize that many of their patterns of escape can be transformed by anticipating what they want to experience in place of entitlement and shame.

A year into treatment, it occurred to Stanley that he could ask his assistant to book him at bed-and-breakfasts whenever possible. A home brought him comfort (a reminder of his grandparents), but a hotel triggered him to feel out of control. He also pursued marriage therapy because he knew that if he did not turn to face his marriage, his sexual behavior would consistently entice him to turn away from it. Stanley’s integrity to anticipate his struggles shows us an essential task: to look at the contexts of our most entitled behavior and scheme for ways to bring delight and transformation instead. In other words, we should not just say no but scheme for ways to bring our bodies pleasure in non-orgasmic ways.

Daily Delight

Pursuing delight is a daily endeavor. The very best activities to pursue are those that help you engage your senses. Swimming, cooking, music, and the outdoors are all good places to start. One of the most significant things a friend has ever done for me was buy me an expensive set of headphones. He thought it was absurd that I worked in the mental-health field and rarely listened to music. He was even more devastated to learn that when I did listen to music, I would use cheap earbuds. He dropped off a pair of headphones at my house and spent the next few months educating me on various types of music and its history.

My life and, more importantly, my bus commute transformed. In the past, I'd sit packed like a sardine on a loud bus trying to make out the words to a lecture amidst the cacophony of other noises. Music, through good headphones, was a magical new world. In the past, I've cried to the meaning of songs but never to the sound of music. It may seem strange to say, but hearing music led me to a more sensual life. The more I was attentive to music, the more I found myself feeling the breezes against my skin and the more I was able to smell in a way that made my mouth water. If we have ears to hear, eyes to see, and skin to feel, there is a wild and sensual world that awaits us.

THE BENEFITS OF REPENTANCE

The joy of repentance is found in turning from entitlement to the pursuit of what we truly deserve. Entitlement is an attitude that we have an inherent right to get what we were deprived of. Repentance refocuses us not on what we demand but on what we deserve. Repentance is faith that God truly desires to give us what is best for us.

You will notice that entitlement and repentance feel different in your body. Entitlement will make you tense and rigid until you get what you demand. Repentance fills you with anticipation for the joy and rest that are to come. As the years go on, you will be less seduced by counterfeit and entitled comfort.

Bank tellers will say that the best way to discern a counterfeit bill is to spend lots of time handling real money. The same is true with delight: The more you live a life of holistic integrity with your desire, the less appealing that behavior promising release but concluding in judgment will become.

Here are some ways you can build a routine of joy and delight:

DAILY TO WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

1. Get a yoga or gym membership and go three or four times a week. Focus regularly on your breathing.
2. Aim for at least seven and a half hours of sleep. Stop using your phone, tablet, and television a half hour before bedtime.
3. Buy an excellent pair of headphones. Make a playlist of beautiful, relaxing music. If you can't find a list you like on Spotify, ask a friend to compile one for you. Some of us remember what it was like to receive a burned CD from a friend; a playlist can feel the same.
4. Unwanted sexual behavior tends to eclipse other problematic behavior. Take an inventory of areas of your life that remain unhealthy. Common issues might involve a disordered relationship with alcohol, tobacco, or food. Discuss these areas with your group, friends, and therapist.

MONTHLY TO YEARLY ACTIVITIES

1. Put four or five things on your calendar each month that bring you delight, and make a special color for them. This could be a vacation, a movie, a new restaurant, a hike, a concert, or a sporting event. Research has shown that anticipation of something pleasurable is the most enjoyable experience (not the memory or the actual experience in the present). Show your updated calendar to your significant other, friend, and therapist.

2. Delete any apps that you tend to use primarily for pornographic or dissociative purposes. For example, Instagram and Tumblr tend to be where squatters show up. You may say these apps connect you to others, but there are other ways to connect. In their place, install mindfulness or meditation apps. One I use is Headspace.
3. Visit a national park. Spend a day in your city's art museum. Spend intentional time bringing healthy relaxation and sensuality to your life. If you have the financial means, schedule six spa treatments in the next twelve months. If possible, pay for them now and put the appointments on your calendar so you have no valid excuse not to go. The point is to put your body before beauty.
4. If you go on a business trip, research the best places to eat in the city. Instead of going to a familiar restaurant chain, try a local and affordable food craze or, if you want to potentially splurge, a restaurant that has won a James Beard Award. Additionally, a bed-and-breakfast is often an alternative many of my clients (like Stanley above) have pursued when they have had significant personal failures in hotels.
5. Schedule a physical and a dental appointment right now if you can't recall the last time you had them.

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[79] Robert McKee, "Storytelling That Moves People," interview by Bronwyn Fryer, *Harvard Business Review*, June 2003, https://hbr.org/2003/06/storytelling-that-moves-people.

[80] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 250.

[81] I addressed this topic in a previous essay: Jay Stringer, "Repetition: Its Essential Role in the Harming and Healing of Our Bodies," in *The Other Journal: Body* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 90–95.

[82] John 3:14 (NLT): “As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”

[83] Dr. Laaser said this in a personal conversation I had with him in March 2016.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

A NEW SEXUAL STORY

Sexual Healing

A NEW SEXUAL STORY IS POSSIBLE. You've begun exploring the stories that await your sexual healing, and now we will explore what it means to prepare for a new and beautiful sexual future. It is not enough to say no; it is not enough to identify your wounds; it is not enough to solely look at the damage. We have to come back to the core issue of desire. What do you want? Do you believe sex is ever something that could bridge heaven to earth instead of earth to hell? These questions themselves corner us with the issue of faith. Do we believe that God—the giver of all life, beauty, and desire—is truly and radically committed to bringing us what our hearts most deeply long for?

I believe God is deeply committed to our joy. He gave up his only Son to make that commitment, and I have to believe there is no failure I can carry out that will ever separate me from that promise. To bring us joy, I believe that God joins with us to heal the harm.

Healing the Harm

If you were involved in a car crash and your arm was broken, there would be protocol to follow. You would go to the hospital to have your arm set and put in a cast and would remain in contact with your doctor and various insurance companies over the following months. Your car would be towed to a body shop. One of the problems when it comes to addressing sexual brokenness is that we do not take practical steps to address the wreckage. Healing will come to only the degree that you assess the particulars of the

damage that years of unwanted sexual behavior have caused. Emotional pain is harder to see than a physical injury, but the process of restoration is not entirely different.

Sexual healing involves four dimensions: reclaiming your body, leaving sexual sin, forgiving yourself and others, and addressing curses and soul ties.

- **Reclaim your body.** You are the owner of your body and have authority over what it participates in. This obviously includes your sexual behavior but also the thoughts you have about your body. There are likely parts of your body that you have cursed. Many people I work with have cursed their noses, their thin or thick bodies, their breasts, their receding hairlines, or their penises or vaginas. When we do not practice being kind to our bodies, we become flippant with the behavior they participate in.

  Choosing a wise guide or therapist will help you journey through the stories that distorted a loving relationship to your body. As you journey, remind yourself of the beauty your body has been given as an image bearer and child of God. It can be helpful to recite certain phrases daily or in the hour of temptation, such as “The Lord is for my body, and my body is for the Lord” and “I am a child of God.”
- **Leave sexual sin.** Leaving sin is about kicking out the squatters that have no place in your heart. This comes from a conviction that sexual sin has no place in your life, and it is a deliberate turn in consciousness to things that bear beauty and integrity. For some people, this is addressed in a twelve-step program, where you will take inventory of how unmanageable your life has become and explore the full scope of how your behavior affected others. The point of this process is to make you realize how pervasive your struggle is. The data will be painful, but the evidence will prepare your heart to say no to your former way of life and yes to all that God might want to accomplish in you.

- **Forgive yourself and others.** Forgiveness is not a onetime event but a continual process where we remember, feel, and turn our shame, pain, and anger over to God. Only when you assess the damage will you know the scope of what forgiveness intends to cover. My friend Becky has said, “Forgiveness is like a shovel; it only penetrates as far as the ground will permit.”[84] When we first put the shovel to dirt, we often recognize not only the hostility toward us but also how much hostility we hold for those who have hurt us. Therefore, the most important initial question related to forgiveness of self and others is “How much violence, bitterness, and shame do I want to hold in my heart?” Grief and vulnerability are how we till the earth of our stories.
- **End generational curses and soul ties.** As you explored your story, you likely recognized that unwanted sexual behavior had a generational component. This could include a mother or father with his or her own involvement with pornography, sexual abuse over generations in your extended family, or other family members dependent on drugs or alcohol. Write down what you know or what you can piece together. Share and reflect on the data with a trusted friend or counselor. I find that when my clients see the long-standing issue of sexual brokenness in their families, they gain tremendous motivation to leave behind different legacies for their own children.

A soul tie is developed when a person holds erotic or shameful power over your soul and body. This could be a past lover, a past abuser, someone in your extended family, a colleague, or a performer in the sex industry. It is anyone your soul remains bound to in unholy fantasy or regret. The purpose of exploring these soul ties is to examine how particular individuals hold you captive in sexual fantasy, hatred, or shame.

When the apostle Paul addressed the issue of *soul ties*, the context refers to men in the city of Corinth who were having sex with temple prostitutes. These men, like many of us, greatly minimized how their sexual

behavior was affecting their souls and bodies. Paul insisted that joining our bodies sexually with someone else is also a spiritual, soulful joining.

In a world of sexual availability, abuse, and promiscuity, it is near-impossible to go through life without developing a soul tie to another human being. There is a tendency in our day and age to minimize the way our past sexual behavior has affected our souls and bodies. The apostle Paul claimed that this separation is not only false but also deeply destructive. Writing a new sexual story begins with paying attention to the erotic and psychological noise in your mind. There may be people, scenes, and fantasies that need to be prayed against and abandoned in order to move forward to sexual flourishing. Consider addressing these matters with a therapist, trusted friend, or pastor who understands his or her own brokenness in these areas as well.

BENEFITS OF SEXUAL HEALING

The open wound of unwanted sexual behavior begins to heal through grief and anger. Your pain decreases, and you find the pursuit of unhealthy sexual behavior to be less desirable. You discover newfound joy in leaving the burden of a shameful life behind. You find yourself in hard but healing conversations with your spouse, children, and friends. You may also find yourself in conversations in which you must extend forgiveness and grace to those who inflicted harm or were silent bystanders to it. These conversations may take place literally or figuratively. In the process of reconciliation, your heart is set free.

Pursuing a New Sexual Story

In the eighties, the famous “Just Say No” campaign was intended to discourage children and adolescents from using drugs. The initiative was not effective and ironically may have increased alcohol and cigarette use

among drug users.[85] The synopsis of the failure was that saying no is not an effective solution to destructive behavior; one must pursue something generative. The same thing is true of sex. Many recovery programs fail because they are preoccupied with telling people what behavior to avoid. True recovery is not about quarantine of the body but about its restoration. A new sexual story is about inviting your body, heart, and soul into the fullness of nurture, sensuality, and eroticism. Healing is about a passionate holiness, setting apart your body to experience lovely, passionate, and restful experiences. God invites us into a new sexual story through inviting us to receive nurture, soliciting our sensuality, and alluring our eroticism.

God Invites Us to Receive Nurture

Nurture is the first integral dimension of writing a new sexual story. As you recall, sex, at its most basic level, is about a longing for connection. Nurture is the means through which we give and receive this desire for connection. It may include genital sex, but it also exists outside it. One of the things I find is that many people do not know how to pursue holistic nurture. When they are happy, they want sex. When they are sad, they want sex. When they are confused, they want sex. This might highlight their love for sex, but it also reveals their limitations in pursuing nurture.

I have yet to meet someone in my counseling office who is fluent in the language of nurture. Very few know how to self-soothe without an orgasm or a chemical, and very few pursue relationships to receive nurture so that they might grow into more self-aware, independent, and loving adults.

One of the intriguing things we've learned from our rat mammal counterparts is that when a mother rat does not lick her ratlets, the babies do not develop opioid receptors in their brains. On a human level, the parallels would be that if a mother or father did not hug, kiss, delight in, and offer curiosity to his or her baby, the child's brain would not develop the necessary receptors to receive and give human care later in life.

Sexually broken people tend to avoid experiences where they risk the chance of being found incompetent or embarrassed, so they often miss the opportunities to experience nurture. To mature, we must allow our needs for guidance and care to be known. In my marriage, I am constantly surprised by how often my wife recognizes that I am not breathing consistently. It is a telltale sign that I am feeling anxious or ashamed. Her nurture invites me back to my breathing and into the vulnerability to share my inner world. Nurture invites us to share our anxious and ashamed thoughts with those who care for us.

Of all the stories I get to hear of transformation in people's lives and marriages, some of the best are when the individuals pursue forms of nurture. Jennifer was a client who was told throughout her life that she was clumsy. Defiantly, she signed up for rock-climbing lessons. The following week, I asked her how it went. She replied, "I am part spider. Who knew!" Asher always wanted to learn about wine but could never admit, even to a grocery store clerk, that he knew next to nothing about it. For his birthday, he scheduled a reservation for his dinner party at Canlis—one of Seattle's best restaurants—and asked the sommelier to order two bottles of wine from regions he was curious about. The most agonizing but redemptive part of the evening for Asher was inviting the sommelier to stay an extra three minutes at the table to give Asher guidance on how to smell and taste each vintage. And David, who struggled with obesity his whole life, asked me, after committing to a yoga practice for more than a year, if I wanted to see him do a headstand. These stories are remarkable not because they are going to make news headlines but because each of the people pursued care for a part of themselves that had been wounded. In pursuing nurture, Jennifer, Asher, and David received the empowerment they were seeking.

God Solicits Our Sensuality

Sensuality is the second component to pursuing new sexual stories for ourselves. Like nurture, if you struggle with having sensuality in your day-to-day life, you should not expect it to magically show up in your sex life.

The following questions are asked in order to assess how sensual you allow yourself to be:

- When you cook your favorite dish, do you savor the sights and smells along the way?
- When you see a hummingbird, do you marvel at its flight?
- When you watch an Olympian, do you experience awe for their ability and dedication?

Every day, if we pay attention, God solicits us to simple experiences of sensuality.

One of my jobs I've held over the years is being a lecturer at the city of Seattle's john school. This is a program for men who have been arrested for soliciting women in prostitution. For almost a decade, I have started each class by asking each of them to pay attention to what their bodies are feeling. Most of them report feeling tired or stressed from a long day of class. I hand out fresh mint to them and ask them to smell it and pay attention to any shifts that occur in their bodies or energy. Smiles often fill the room. Of all the men I've invited to smell mint, only one has reacted with anything other than delight. (He had spent much of his life working in mint fields. He was, perhaps understandably, visibly repulsed.)

Inevitably, these men share stories of why they like mint: mojitos, mint tea, mint gum, and peppermint essential oils. I continue to invite them to pay attention to their bodies as they take olfactory dimensions of the mint. When they do so, they say their bodies feel calmer, safer, and more enjoyable. What I am inviting them into is how to be sensual men without needing to be erotic. I want them to behold the goodness of their sensual abilities. I want them to see that sensuality is about opening our bodies to being present, aroused, and influenced by the world around us. If we do not feel wonder at the flight of a hummingbird or eagle or at the scent of mint, how will we even begin to feel the stunning sensuality of sex?

One of the standard treatment recommendations for those who struggle with unwanted sexual behavior is to have sixty to ninety days of abstinence from sexual behavior. The reason for this is that the neural pathways of attention and motivation in our brains need to be rewired. What research about the eating disorder bulimia (binging on food followed by a purge of the food through vomiting or significant exercise) has shown is that a great majority of a bulimic's eating has nothing to do with hunger. Rather than hunger, these individuals experience stress, anger, anxiety, and depression and use food to alter these unpleasant emotions. Pornography and sexual behavior can be used in similar ways. In committing to two to three months of abstinence, you learn how to read your body and bring sensuality to it. There will be times when you need to teach your body how to be calm, and other times when you can bring it into passionate, sensual, and non-orgasmic activities. It is crucial for you to learn sensual activities that care for your body and arouse it in non-erotic ways.

God Allures Us to Eroticism

Most men and women who have a disordered relationship with sex believe they are very erotic individuals, perhaps too erotic for their own good. Therefore, to be invited to pursue eroticism may seem redundant or even terrifying, particularly if you are trying to rein in your sexual desire. Recall, however, that the original Greek meaning of *eros* has to do with a creative force capable of transforming the world (see chapter 1). Psychologist and author Rollo May wrote, "Eros is the center of the vitality of a culture—its heart and soul. And when release of tension takes the place of creative eros, the downfall of the civilization is assured."[86]

Eros, properly pursued, is one of the primary ways God allures us to redemption. He is not holding our sexual sins against us, waiting for our cultural downfall. Rather, he is doing what he always does: offering us a way out of slavery, through inviting us to a land we have longed for but

have yet to find. Through eros, God is alluring us to be far more sexual than we could have ever conceived at the height of our unwanted sexual behavior.

We experience the firstfruits of this promised land when our relationships give and receive nurture, our senses become engulfed with laughter and delight, and our bodies experience ecstasy so beyond our comprehension that the most probable explanation is that the Author of this pleasure is the most wildly sexual being we could ever search for. In this way, eroticism reveals that our cultural sexual desires are not too strong but too weak.[87]

Encounters with Eros

You encounter eros when your body experiences rest after sex and your eyes fill with tears, knowing there are no more secrets, no more double life you must cover. Eros greets you when you watch your daughter get married and marvel that somehow even the painful and broken years of marriage with your spouse are part of the blessedness of the day. You participate in eros in your body when you imagine what it will be like to be joined with a spouse and lover in the sacred nakedness of your bodies. Eros is discovered each time your body experiences the dovetailing of desire and gratitude. In this way, eroticism, properly understood, is always unifying you to your body, your lover, and seemingly all of creation.

Bestselling author Christopher West, in his book *Fill These Hearts*, said that our hearts know we were made for bliss and ecstasy. This blissful ecstasy, West said, is our eternal destiny. He wrote, “The Latin *destinare* is an archer’s term that means ‘to aim at.’ Desire has a trajectory. Wherever we aim it, that’s where we will ultimately arrive.”[88] The holy uniqueness of eros is that in no other dimension of life are God and man so mutually committed to finding one another. Through eros, God aims for the heart of man. And man, through eros, aims for the heart of God.

God invites us to the renewal of our minds, not the reining in of desire. The distinction is of paramount importance in our understanding of eroticism. Left to ourselves, we attempt to manage our arousal for the fear of it's getting out of hand. When we do, we inadvertently install short ceilings on our sexual lives. God, however, wants us to exchange our hovels for cathedrals. Healing is not found in condemning desire but in liberating it to pursue sexual stories that soar to new heights of glory, honor, and worship.

Through eros, God bridges the beauty of bodily pleasure and the awe of heaven. When these worlds collide, we connect to worship. Worship is the experience of things being simultaneously exactly the way they are supposed to be and yet far too good to be true. Our hearts know we were made to live in cathedrals of worship, not hovels of sexual shame. Until we find worship, our hearts are restless.[89]

In your unwanted sexual behavior, you were pursuing a knockoff version of worship. The behavior baited you, but when you bit the fruit, your soul knew it had been duped. Therefore, the greatest risk you will take in sexual healing is to allow your heart to be released to be seduced again. If you use sex to escape life or pursue pleasure apart from relationship, you will wither. But if you allow sex to bridge you to worship, you will discover the deepest longings of your heart. God exchanges our unwanted ashes for beauty, sexual silence for discovery, and shame for erotic pleasure.

BENEFITS OF PURSUING NURTURE, SENSUALITY, AND EROTICISM

In pursuing nurture, sensuality, and eroticism, you teach your unwanted shame that it does not have the final word. This is the Good News of the gospel: You've been harmed and you've done harm, but the antidote is not

quarantine; it is greater participation in the goodness of your body. Pursuing a new sexual story shifts the focus from your brokenness to a renewed imagination of how lovely that erotic passion can become.

Conclusion: A Life of Serenity

One of the most extraordinary dimensions of the botany world is a rhizome. A rhizome is a continually growing horizontal stem that puts out roots and shoots at random intervals. If you have ever picked up fresh ginger at a grocer or come across an aspen tree grove, you've seen an example of a rhizome. Above ground, an aspen grove appears to have individual trees, but below, their roots are all connected in a rhizome. I find two characteristics of rhizomes remarkable: First, they can flourish in almost any environment, and second, if they are separated into pieces, each piece can give rise to a new rhizome.

A rhizome is a good example of what the experience of serenity is meant to be. Serenity is the ability to remain whole in the various environments and shifting conditions of life. Serenity is what the psalmist was getting at when he said, "I have calmed and quieted my soul, . . . like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:2, ESV).

In my work with clients, I have noticed that around year two of treatment, they seem to comment more and more about this experience of serenity. Serenity occurs mostly in the small, subtle moments of life: the breeze on a beautiful day, the coolness of the sheets and the warmth of a blanket when you go to bed, the desire to get coffee with a friend and tell him or her some of the shame you've been carrying, and having your spouse or housemates out of town and feeling okay in your body. Life does not always have to be epic or wild or extraordinary; it is enough to feel centered, calm, and enjoyable.

I had the privilege of interviewing Craig Gross, founder of xxxchurch.com, who told me that one of the complaints his ministry receives from those who sign up for their signature product, X3watch (which monitors online activity and sends reports to your accountability partner in order to spur on open and honest conversations), is the limitations of their software monitoring. Craig told me that users want surveillance on all their app usage, such as Tinder, and even GPS tracking on their cars, to discourage them from going to strip clubs. What Craig astutely pointed out was "what people often want is restriction, but that's not freedom."[90] Surveillance constructs a prison, but serenity opens the gates for play and true freedom. Surveillance is a counterfeit.

As a rabbi, Jesus instructed his followers to be perfect as he was perfect, meaning "whole" or "mature." In a sense, Jesus was saying, "Be perfect, like a ripe piece of fruit," not "Be perfect, like flawless grammar." In society, particularly in faith communities, you have likely felt the pressure to look and think in a perfect, grammatical way with your sexual life. This is an unhelpful invitation to bury your lust at the cost of listening to it and transforming your longings. God wants maturity not just for your holiness but also for your delight.

The good news is that God loves all people, especially those not accepted by society. The healing path is not about trying to conform to this demand for perfection through avoiding mistakes, darting your eyes, or killing sexual desire. Healing occurs through the integrity of becoming nurturing, sensual, and erotic with your body and soul. Your sexual story may not presently look at all as you think it should, but it is becoming whole. Measure your growth not by perfection but by outgrowing your need for unwanted sexual behavior. When you find yourself more seduced by beauty and holiness, you will know something within you is being transformed from the inside out.

[84] Becky Allender, “Tilling Forgiveness through Love,” *Allender Center* (blog), March 24, 2016, https://theallendercenter.org/2016/03/tilling-forgiveness/.

[85] Scott O. Lilienfeld and Hal Arkowitz, “Why ‘Just Say No’ Doesn’t Work,” *Scientific American*, January 1, 2014, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-just-say-no-doesnt-work/.

[86] Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: Dell, 1969), 98.

[87] C. S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), said, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased” (26).

[88] Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing* (New York: Image, 2013), xiii.

[89] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*: “Our hearts are restless until they can find rest in you.”

[90] Craig Gross, in discussion with the author, February 2016, Pasadena, CA.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EXERCISE ATTUNEMENT AND CONTAINMENT IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

THE PARADOX OF RELATIONSHIPS is that they are the context of our greatest harm but also of our deepest healing. Author Harville Hendrix said it this way: “We are born in relationship, we are wounded in relationship, and we can be healed in relationship.”[91] When I explore the broken relational templates of my clients’ lives, they often give me befuddled looks and say, “That isn’t normal? What are relationships supposed to look like?”

The alternative to unhealthy relational patterns is learning to invest in transformative relationships characterized by “attunement and containment,” “conflict and repair,” and “vulnerability and strength.” These characteristics are paradoxes that every healthy relationship has to hold in tension. In the same way that you would need to adjust the treble and bass on your stereo to find the best sound quality, you need to learn how to correctly moderate these relational tensions in your life. Relationships are messy containers of tension that mature the more you allow the dialectical and paradoxical elements to exist.

The human heart tends to calcify to one end of these relational polarities. Over the past few years, my wife’s parents courageously faced severe health concerns. The pain and anxiety on my wife’s face during the worst of these months was palpable. In response, I wanted her to “contain” her grief by directing her attention to themes in her family that she could control. This, of course, led to a number of conflicts because she knew my

calcification toward containment was simultaneously a commitment to not extending care (attunement) in her time of need. Calcification protected me from feeling lost and impotent in the complexity of grief, but it also stole from me. I lost a season of tenderness with my wife.

Calcification will also occur when you prevent necessary conflict from emerging in your relationships. During my senior year of college, a friend got engaged and no one in my group of friends knew how to celebrate his engagement. We saw an enmeshed couple; we could not tell where one partner ended and the other began. Anytime my friend expressed a desire to have time to himself or with friends, his significant other would consider it selfish. His solution was to avoid conflict with her, which indirectly meant he would lose contact with his friends. Despite his friends' raising their concerns, he continued on his enmeshed path. I talked to him years later, and he noted how torn he felt inside. He wanted the respect of his friends but feared he would never be able to get married if he did not choose to care for his fiancée's desires at the cost of his own. Very similarly to my own calcification, my friends protected him from the inherent conflict of relationships.

The invitation in this chapter is to understand these relational polarities as holy contradictions God intends to use for our transformation. The degree to which you allow these natural tensions to exist will determine the quality and substance of your relationships. As a man calcified toward surrogate forms of containment, strength, and conflict, I am meant to grow in my ability to practice attunement, vulnerability, and repair. My friend from college is meant to grow in his ability to tolerate conflict, become wise in containment, and grow stronger in order to engage himself and others with greater integrity. You will undoubtedly encounter your lack of skill when you deploy from your calcified pole. That is okay. Your courage to persist will steadily build proficiency. In this chapter, we'll focus on attunement and containment; we'll focus on the other practices in the chapters that follow.

Attunement and Containment

Imagine you are the parent of a seventh-grade boy. He tells you there is a sleepover at his friend Brady's house and he would like to go. As a parent, you might ask for more details. "Who all is going? Are Brady's parents going to be there?" Your son looks away, knowing his petition is now doomed, and replies, "I don't think so. I don't know why that matters."

Your parent radar is beeping, alerting you that these friends are likely planning to do more than just play video games. At this juncture, you are likely to feel torn. You ponder the dilemma for a moment: *Seventh-grade boys with no supervision? What an awful idea! Do Brady's parents even know about this?*

At the same time, something in you reminds you that your son has had a very difficult year academically and socially. You remember that sliver of delight on his face when he told you he was invited to a party, something you know he has been waiting for all year. This situation requires a parent to practice attunement and containment.

Now imagine you receive a call from a friend who has just told you some of the difficulties he is facing in his intimate relationships and career. It is the third time you've heard a version of this story in six months. You want to be empathic, but you are starting to feel drained and increasingly irritated. You've listened, you've offered suggestions that he find a therapist and career coach, you've offered to get coffee, but it's clear your friend is committed to recreating the problems around him. Then when he gets overwhelmed, he vents. Simultaneously, you feel cold and yet really want to see these issues get resolved in his life, even if it's so you never have to hear about them again.

Relationships alert us to the reality that there are no simple solutions or easy fixes. Most of us, however, will not step with honor and honesty into the relational binds that unfold in front of us. Instead, we tend to keep listening with our ears but close our hearts and souls. Or we vanish from others and play busy.

In Dan Allender's book *How Children Raise Parents*, he noted that every child is asking at least two core questions: (1) Am I loved? and (2) Can I get my own way?[92] As adults, we continue to ask very similar questions. The role of attunement in relationships is to tell others, "Yes, you are loved." And the role of containment is to mature us by letting others know, "You will not always get what you want from me. I have my own limits, needs, and observations too."

Attunement's primary task is to recognize the face and story of the person in front of you with kindness and curiosity. The chief task of containment involves creating boundaries. Boundaries are important because when you do not feel as if you can say no to others, there is no way you can have a meaningful yes. In relationships, attunement without containment will become accommodation, and containment without attunement will become a form of dogmatism.

Think about being the parent of the seventh grader who was invited to the party. Attunement allows you to join in on your child's delight for being invited to the party. Containment, however, might influence you to say no to a request to stay at his friend's house without adult supervision. In the example of your friend's experiencing perpetual relationship and career difficulties, attunement allows you to hear the pain in your friend's voice and let him know how much you care. Containment, however, allows you to say something along the lines of "I am willing to keep talking about this, but only if part of that conversation is to explore why these dynamics might be occurring so consistently in your life. I care for this relationship and do not want it reduced to venting sessions."

Creativity is the antidote when you are sensing attunement versus containment within relationships. A parent could attune to the excitement and meaning of their child's desire but also say no, accompanying it with an offer to host the sleepover or take his friend out to the movies. Similarly, a bid to have sex with your spouse could be met with a no or "It's just too late." Here, attunement is needed not only for your spouse but also for yourself. The internal dialogue might sound something like *I was really*

hoping for intimacy with my wife, but she is clearly exhausted. My desire for sex is good [self-attunement], and instead of going to porn after she goes to bed, I can unwind with her and invite her to share more with me about the most exhausting elements of her day [self-containment and other-centered attunement]. In the morning, I will reengage the conversation around sexual intimacy and find a time that works best to be with one another. Every relational dilemma we encounter is a place to practice the harmonizing of attunement and containment.

How to Attune and Contain

To practice attunement, create space for your partner and dear friends to know you and for you to know them. Apart from a mirror or a selfie, you cannot see your own face. One of the implications of this is that you need others to help you know who you are. When you allow your emotions to be seen, you will be less dependent on your need to escape them. When you attune to the needs of your significant other and dear friends and allow them to do the same, the hostility that drives so much of unwanted sexual behavior is reduced. Here are some relationally beneficial things you can do.

- **Share.** Tell the primary people in your life about what your day or week holds. What are you excited about? What is making you anxious? Where are you feeling forgotten or upset?
- **Listen (part 1).** Attune to your emotional life by listening to what your body is experiencing. You may notice anxiety or anger or shame. Instead of running from those feelings or immediately sharing them, attune to them. Imagine your inhales bringing comfort or power to the places of discomfort, and visualize the tension leaving your body on the exhale.
- **Ask.** Ask your spouse and best friends about their lives. Those who struggle with unwanted sexual behavior have notorious difficulties in caring for others because they are extremely self-focused and they’ve

rarely seen attunement modeled well. Ask those in your life what the following day or week or year holds for them and what they feel up against. Where do they seem excited? Where are they experiencing dread?

- **Reflect.** Reflect at the end of each week where you attuned well and when you wanted to avoid.
- **Get creative.** Practice containing your emotions through utilizing creativity. Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, said, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”[93] There are times when the stresses and futility of life will be too much to bear. One of the best ways we can practice containment is to anticipate our needs. This forces us to say yes to the things we need and no to things that will drive us deeper into stress and deprivation. Often clients I’ve worked with pursue a weekly cleaning service, hire a local company to deliver food on nights particularly busy for their families, and find regular babysitters for date nights with their partners. Creativity with containment will provide you with the buoyancy to get through difficulties and transitions.
- **Listen (part 2).** When the psalmist wrote, “Know my anxious thoughts” (Psalm 139:23), it implied he was attuned to the reality that he had anxious thoughts. Spend five minutes every day learning to attune to and then contain your emotions. What is your body telling you? Is it angry, with a ball of fire in your chest? Is it full of adrenaline, propelling you recklessly forward? Is it sad, inviting you to find comfort? The more you know what your body is feeling, the more you will know you can contain your emotions before they get out of hand. Ponder how these experiences might be asking you to grow personally. Investing in relationships is a significant ingredient for a healthful life, but it does not negate your responsibility to care for yourself through containment.

- **Forecast.** Where are your negative emotions likely to take you if left uncontained? Are there events on your calendar or times of day when you will be particularly tempted to engage in unwanted sexual behavior? Fortify your resolve to say no by pursuing integrity with what truly needs care or completion.
- **Pursue connection.** When you experience difficult emotions with others, pursue connection. When we feel rejected or forgotten, we tend to withdraw or blame. Instead share what *you* are feeling, not what the other person did. For example, when you feel distance from a significant person in your life, set up a time in the near future to talk about it. Rather than starting out the conversation with "You always think about me last," say, "I've noticed there is a shift occurring in our relationship, and I've wondered if you have experienced that too."
- **Pursue creativity with others.** Struggling with unwanted sexual behavior, you've learned to spend a great deal of your time alone. Being alone then becomes highly associated with pursuing unwanted sexual behavior or other distractions. Scheming for unwanted sexual behavior has undoubtedly hijacked your creative energy. Contain the most predictable times of acting out through pursuing enjoyable or productive activities with others.

BENEFITS OF ATTUNEMENT AND CONTAINMENT

By practicing attunement and containment, you learn how to give and receive care, the most significant building block of relationships. From this solid foundation of knowing and being known, you will reach new summits of intimacy with others. Few of my male clients recognize any needs they have except for sex. This puts a tremendous strain on their partners to be sexual in order to experience intimacy. The pressure men put on their partners inevitably erodes desire. How can a partner desire the very thing she is pressured to offer? Attunement and containment allow sex to become

something other than the release of tension or the solo symbol of commitment. Eroticism between a couple is strengthened through being woven together with holistic passion, pleasure, and care.

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[91] Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Holt, 2007), xxxv.

[92] Dan Allender, *How Children Raise Parents: The Art of Listening to Your Family* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2005), 33.

[93] Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 32. Kabat-Zinn saw this caption on a poster showing an image of an older surfer.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PRACTICE CONFLICT AND REPAIR IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

IMAGINE A THREE-YEAR-OLD in a coffee shop who has just been told he can eat only one doughnut. The child's anger escalates after the sugar boundary is enforced. The child falls to the ground crying, and when the dad goes to pick him up, the toddler slaps him. At this point the dad takes a quick glance around the shop and sees that everyone is staring. Steeped in shame, the dad escalates his intensity and yells at his son for his behavior. He scoops his son up, and they beeline for the family car. Still screaming and kicking his little legs, the boy is placed under further lockdown in his car seat for what is sure to be a maddening ride home.

At this juncture, the scene is full of conflict. Father and son are divided against one another, and both are filled with enmity. What the son needs most is to have the relationship repaired, not further ruptured through punishment (whether physical or psychological) or stonewalling.

An attuned parent is able to reflect about the situation and talk to his three-year-old about what happened. The dad may say something like this: "I got very upset with you in the coffee shop and yelled. I'm sure it was very scary to see Daddy's face look so mean. I am so sorry, Son. I want to treat you with kindness." The repair begins to start, but the parent must also address the toddler's tantrum after the boy's body is regulated. The father might wait twenty minutes or more to remind his son about the rupture. "I know you were very upset when I said you could have only one. Doughnuts are ridiculously delicious, and I understand why you would want more. It is okay to be mad, but it is not okay to use your strong arms to hit me."

During the course of childhood, we undergo thousands of cycles of conflict (coffee-shop situation) and repair (conversation at home afterward). This allows children to develop language for what is happening internally and interpersonally. Just as important, it gives them the knowledge that their behavior and emotions, whether angry or sad or anywhere in between, will not result in the termination of relationships. When children are not equipped to turn to healthy relationships for repair, they will eventually look outside their parents or primary caregivers for rescue. As teenagers, this rescue is often a behavior or relationship that offers a hybrid of relief and revenge for what their parents provided.

Conflict alone is not evidence of an unhealthy relationship. Quite the contrary. Those in healthy relationships are able to view conflict as a vital threshold of growth. Rather than blame one another within conflict, healthy individuals seek integrity to address their contribution to the madness before them. This is what I refer to as generative conflict.

Messy conflict, on the other hand, occurs when a couple is committed to blaming one another without any reflection on the deeper dynamics at play. In my office, one scenario I often witness with married couples is that the husband wants to connect sexually, but the wife wants to connect relationally. One spouse might say, “I would be more open to sex if you were more open to conversation,” which then tees up this next response from the other spouse: “I would be more open to conversation if you were more open to sex.”

For many couples, the conversation ends there and mild to extreme conflict ensues. The spouse who doesn’t want sex might roll over in bed, irritated by the demand on her body, and her partner rolls out of bed, angry that his desire is so rarely received. Within the next hour or day, the husband will seek out some form of dissociation, often escalating to the use of pornography. The function of pornography gives him the ability to lean on something that simultaneously allows for escape from the present messy conflict and is something that can make his spouse pay.

In most marriages, messy conflict serves as a way to bring about an immature form of repair. If the husband is upset, he may increasingly withhold his emotional life. At some level, he knows that his silence will set his wife up to eventually move toward him with an invitation for sex in order to release the marital tension. As you can see, this is an example of immature repair. Sadly, immature, surrogate repair is the most common type I see in my counseling practice. If the wife does not offer to relieve the conflict, the couple will often continue to be on edge with one another. Or if messy conflict occurs for years on end, the couple will get into a battle over who wants sex and intimacy the least.[94]

In this marital scenario we just explored, conflict is not being used to grow the couple into healthy human beings (generative conflict). Instead, messy conflict is used to maintain the status quo of the sexual relationship. Rarely will the couple acknowledge that the partner who has the least desire for sex may be the healthiest. After all, why would anyone truly desire sex when the symbolic meaning is to bring catharsis to messy conflict? Instead, the one who wants more sex is seen as healthy, despite desiring a form of sex that is filled with entitlement.

For a couple to transition from messy to generative conflict and from immature to mature repair, they individually need the ability to be honest about their hostility toward one another and explore the dimensions of their own integrity that have been forfeited. In the example above, the husband will need the honesty to engage how much easier it's been to blame his wife's lack of desire for sex than to address how his sexual entitlement erodes intimacy. The wife will need the honesty to share how she allowed the meaning of sex to be about the release of tension because the cost of her desire to be deeply and holistically known would have been too much to bear.

Before Engaging Conflict and Repair

Before you begin to engage conflict in your relationships, there are three important things to keep in mind:

1. You can do only your part for others.
2. Getting close to others takes iterative work.
3. Every person you meet offers you a mirror that reflects some part of you.

Let's look at each of these more closely and why they are important as you get close to others to offer them empathy.

The first thing to remember in conflict is that it is not your responsibility to change the other person. During conflict, many people feel an enormous burden or entitlement to change the other person. You must remember that God is far more committed to this person in your family or community than you could ever be, even if it were your full-time job. Change is a slow, often mysterious process, and you will need to adjust your sense of timing. When it comes to addressing an affair or pornography use, you must give those you have hurt time to feel the shock, pain, betrayal, confusion, anger, and ambivalence that your choices have ushered in.

Second, each person you encounter has a style of relating. You might think of it as one's personality. Everyone you meet is asking two things of you simultaneously. With one hand, he waves you in to come closer: "Get to know me a bit more. Share a meal with me. I want to let you in." But with the other hand, he stretches out his arm with a stop sign. He is deeply afraid of being seen and known. He will warn you, at times with a jab and other times with an uppercut, if you get too close or see him contrary to his neatly constructed identity. Responses of "Come closer" and "Come no further" are both normal, and all you are doing at this stage is gathering data about someone's style of relating.

Knowing your family members' or friends' styles of relating is important because it helps explain the feelings you experience in their presence. For instance, you may see them waving you in and feel afraid of what they need from you. Or you may feel very rejected when they put up their stop signs. You are responsible for how you metabolize this fear or

rejection. At the same time, these reactions offer valuable clues into the distance the other people likely want you to orbit around them. Stay curious about your responses and the person in front of you. Over the course of your relationships, you will be able to share these reflections. Remember, these are not one-and-done conversations; you will have countless opportunities to bring up these dynamics with those close to you.

Third, allow what is difficult about the other person you are having conflict with to lead you into a deeper understanding of yourself. Conflicts with others are often telling, inviting us to face unpleasant realities about ourselves. Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung said, "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."[95] For example, we might blame our spouses' low sex drives or the inherent stress of our jobs for our pornography use. This is appealing to us because we can locate the irritation outside ourselves rather than understanding that we do not know how to tolerate difficult dynamics within us. The more we allow our conflicts with others to shed light on our blindness, the more we will see the dimensions of our lives that need to mature.

Practicing these three concepts prior to engaging in conflict will benefit you immensely. Rather than enacting conflict, you will learn to reflect on what the relationship is stirring within you. In the next few months, you will likely receive difficult news at work, have a spouse or significant other go to bed without checking in or calling you, or feel excluded by your group of friends. For example, rather than yelling at your significant other for forgetting you, your responsibility is to reflect. Is it your responsibility to control your significant other's behavior? How might these experiences be inviting you to care for an open wound? What might be going on with your significant other that would make him or her choose to head to bed without checking in with you? Pondering these questions prior to engaging conflict will create good soil for the work of repair to begin.

How to Practice Conflict and Repair in Relationships

If you have a spouse or significant other, this relationship will be the primary focus of your journey through conflict and repair. At a minimum, this means addressing the infidelity or involvement with pornography that you brought into your relationship. It could also mean repairing some of the lies you told friends and family members as a result of your secret unwanted sexual behavior. Although many people caught in unwanted sexual behavior go back and forth about whether to disclose their behavior to others, research has found that even though it is difficult, the betrayed spouse tends to prefer to have the knowledge of what the offending party has done.[96] It is vital that you recognize that all relationships, particularly with loved ones, are repaired through a long process, not a singular event.

I strongly recommend you refrain from telling your spouse or others the details related to your unwanted sexual behavior until they have adequate levels of support around them. This means you tell your spouse or significant other that you have been addressing some of the major themes of your life with a therapist, faith leader, mentor, or trusted friend and have been advised to invite your spouse to find his or her own circle of care when the time of disclosure comes. If you are considering a therapist for yourself, you should ask any potential candidate about his or her familiarity and competency with the process of disclosure.

Addressing infidelity is a multilayered process that depends on the details of your unwanted sexual behavior. Here are some foundational (though not comprehensive) actions to pursue.

1. **End the secrecy of the affair or participation in unwanted sexual behavior by talking to a therapist or trusted guide.** Although you may see some of the external forces that drove you into your behavior, the responsibility resides with you and you alone. The time to address the dysfunctional patterns in the relationship that may have contributed to the affair will occur later (in many cases, six to twelve months from the time of disclosure). Staying focused on your actions will prove invaluable in later stages of relational healing.

2. **Address your deceit and/or blame.** Next to the agony of betrayal, the second dynamic that creates the most anger for betrayed spouses is that they were led to believe they were the problematic ones in the relationships. During the course of addressing your problematic sexual behavior in the context of your marriage, your therapist may encourage you to write a letter of amends to your spouse. This will include a confession of the times you lied to your spouse, made her feel as though she were the crazy one, deceived her into thinking that your behavior happened only one time, or blamed her for either not being sexual enough or "letting herself go." Before any level of forgiveness can take place, you and your spouse must have the full scope of what must be forgiven.

   This season of repair could take months or years for your spouse or family and friends to navigate. Therefore, you must prepare for how you will interact with your desire for sex or intimacy when your spouse needs a season of emotional and sexual separation to address the harm you brought to the relationship. For many men, this can often instigate another season of pornography dependence. The way to prevent this relapse is to ask others (therapist, friend, pastor) for help with the complexity and stress you are facing. Community strengthens us in ways we would never be able to conceive in our secrecy. Additionally, around the time of disclosure to spouses, many will choose to commence sixty to ninety days of sexual abstinence (discussed in chapter 12). Suffering the pain you introduced to your partner's life while simultaneously learning how to understand and regulate your emotional life without sex is one of the most powerful combinations of change you will undergo in this process of repair.

3. **Begin repairing the relationships with your children and family members.** If you are a parent, particularly to adolescents or adult children, it is important to recognize that your kids perhaps grew up under considerable rigidity or disengagement. If your home was rigid, they likely felt that their lives were under constant surveillance. If you

were disengaged, your children likely wandered through life wondering if they were truly loved and delighted in. You are accountable for the coercion or abdication of your parental power. The task ahead is to reflect on what type of home you set up for your children and explore how this affected them.

Contemplation is the start of repair. When it comes time to share your thoughts with your children, be sure to give them ample time to metabolize your words and offer their experiences in their own words. One of my clients, months before his son's wedding, told him, "When you were growing up, I was incredibly controlling and invasive about your dating life and how much time you could spend with your girlfriends. I used shame and guilt tactics to parent you. The truth is that I was in an intense battle with my own sexual brokenness, and it was easier to aim my anger at you than address my own hypocrisy. Since I've started therapy, I've been setting aside money for *your* counseling too, if you ever want to go. I know I've been an intimidating father, and I want you to know how much I desire to be a kinder dad."

4. **Write a letter to your mom and/or dad addressing the pain you experienced as their child.** View it as a personal journal entry, not a letter you will share with them. Nevertheless, write it to them. You might choose to write about the triangulation, rigidity, or disengagement you experienced or the way those dynamics set you up for bullying or sexual abuse. The purpose of this letter is not to blame them but to take an inventory of the pain you experienced. Remember, honor does not negate the necessity for honesty. Many of us avoid conflict because we do not want to deal with pain.

   Next, write a response letter from the perspective of your mom and dad in which you imagine them acknowledging your pain. Although the majority of us will never have the privilege of hearing our parents repent for the harm they brought into our lives, this does not prevent you from imagining what it would be like to have them say

the words you have longed to hear. Take a half hour and write these letters. Notice what you feel when given the opportunity to engage in conflict and repair.

BENEFITS OF CONFLICT AND REPAIR

Trust is established through the interplay of generative conflict and mature repair (not perfection). You discover that repair helps reduce the anger that fuels your flight to unwanted sexual behavior. Chronic stress stemming from relational division and secrecy is reduced. Mysteriously, you find yourself craving connection with your significant other or friends rather than pursuing sexual disconnection to address your anger and hurt.

[94] I am indebted to Dr. David Schnarch for this observation. See his book *Intimacy and Desire: Awaken the Passion in Your Relationship* (New York: Beaufort, 2009).

[95] Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 247.

[96] A good book on this is Stefanie Carnes's *Mending a Shattered Heart: A Guide for Partners of Sex Addicts* (Carefree, AZ: Gentle Path, 2011).

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PURSUE STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES, the God of the universe is depicted as strength and vulnerability in perfect union. He is the powerful creator, unmatched in his strength. Some Middle Eastern traditions might have gods of the sun, moon, or stars, but the Jewish God is the creator of the sun, moon, and stars. At the same time, though, this God is not unaffected by human struggle. To the contrary, he is constantly taking up residence in the situations of vulnerability that his people face. Other gods are believed to create human beings because they are lazy and want their created beings to do the hard work. In the Hebrew worldview, however, God's hands are in the dirt, forming life and inviting his creation into joyful co-participation in the world.

When God's strength is present, creation flourishes. His strength does not dominate others; it serves them. God pursues the weary, increases the power of the weak (see Isaiah 40:29), and equips others to co-create the Kingdom of Heaven alongside him. God's vulnerability is equally remarkable. His vulnerability takes on the very illnesses and sin that have contaminated the human condition. At the climax of the Gospels, we see the power and vulnerability of God intertwined. His ultimate strength rises out of his ultimate defeat: resurrection from the grave.

True Strength

My friend Jill is a managing partner of a consulting firm. Through the years, I have been both a witness and a recipient of her godlike strength. When Jill is leading a meeting or a company, you do not get the sense that she is attempting to use her powerful insights against you. Instead, the insights are presented to serve you, equip you, and call you to more than you would be willing to imagine on your own.

When practicing strength, keep the tension between pursuing your personal dignity and pursuing the welfare of others. Those who pursue only themselves become vacuous men and women, blind to the needs of others. Those who pursue only the welfare of others develop identities in reference to the needs placed on them by others and do not know who they truly are. When you gain a sense of your relational strength, you walk the razor edge of power. Too much of it, and you intimidate or irritate others. Too little of it, and people will know you are choosing a path of cowardice.

Melissa sought out therapy because she felt used throughout her life. Her employer owed her thousands of dollars in unpaid overtime. Her spouse recently got a dog for their daughter despite knowing she was allergic. In this same season, Melissa's brother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She didn't know what to do, so she chose not to talk to or see him for six months. In addition, Melissa's marriage had been slowly eroding for three years and went into a downward spiral after her husband found her pursuing a same-sex romantic interest with an old sorority friend from college and saw her TV-viewing history, which included pornography.

As you can see, Melissa's circumstances were making known the difficulty she had in practicing strength. As a result, her dignity at work suffered, she felt too stuck to pursue the welfare of her brother, and she consistently struggled in bringing her needs to an emotionally calloused husband. The fantasies within unwanted sexual behavior often reveal our inability to find what we want and need in reality. Melissa could pursue what she wanted, but only in a world without any forms of relational resistance.

Austin entered therapy in the hopes of addressing porn addiction and learning anger management. His initial phone call to me followed a family vacation where his wife was driving in a tremendous thunderstorm and swerved to miss a braking car ahead, only to collide with a car in another lane. Seconds after the accident, Austin went into a rage, berating his wife for her incompetence while his young children screamed helplessly in their car seats behind him. Later that evening, his wife caught him masturbating in their vacation rental home. In the first month of therapy, he recognized he was using a counterfeit version of strength to dominate his wife and children.

Both Melissa and Austin have distorted the purpose and efficacy of strength. The counterfeit version of strength for Austin is anger. He recognized that he had learned this misuse of strength through watching his father. Using anger to intimidate others is not strength; intimidation is bullying. Melissa struggles with the other counterfeit version of strength: abdication of power. When strength is distorted through anger or abdication, relationships suffer.

After exploring these themes, both Melissa and Austin began to engage their strength differently. Melissa asked her husband for a date on Saturday and told him about her hurt over his getting a dog against her wishes. She told him, “That dog, as much as we love him, needs to go.” That same weekend, they found a new home for the animal. Melissa also raised the issue of compensation with her employer with the subtle indication that she knew a good lawyer. A payment plan was quickly worked out. With the extra money, Melissa purchased a plane ticket to visit her brother. In choosing strength, she found that strength compounded in interest, allowing her to shed tears over her brother’s disease. She deeply apologized for how she hid in their relationship. After a year of intentionally practicing strength, she said it had been the most restful year she had ever had as an adult.

Austin’s change was equally impressive. His wife loved to run, and he began to join her. He used the runs to invite his wife to tell him stories about her life. He laughed at how his poor fitness finally allowed him to

simply listen to his wife. He learned that her father was a workaholic, which had left her constantly in harm's way with a cruel mother. On one run through their local park, she told him about the year she got her driver's permit and how her mother would yell at her for anything she was not doing right. On one occasion, this caused her to slam into a parked car. Recognizing the connection immediately, Austin stopped the run and held his wife as they both wept for how her story and his abuse of strength had collided. Austin was learning how to use his voice to engage others, which allowed for beautiful attunement to his wife, and the result was rest for everyone around him.

True Vulnerability

I met a man named Brent my first year in seminary. He was ten years older than I was, and I immediately thought of him as a big brother. We eventually became housemates and dear friends. Brent is a rare man who paradoxically experiences grief and joy, the embodiment of godlike vulnerability. To know Brent is to encounter his heartache: He has been single for much longer than he or others would have ever thought, a host of allergies adversely affect his day-to-day life, and vocational longings and questions are ever present. At the same time, to know Brent is to encounter joy. Those of us who know Brent all have stories about him that fill us with guttural laughter and a deep appreciation for his character. At times, he is the life of the party, and at others a sage of wisdom.

One evening, we were up late drinking Islay Scotch and sharing portions of our lives that have seldom been told. As Brent talked about the ache and implications of singleness, I could tell that shame was a much less powerful force in his life than in mine. As he spoke, my mind was busy with thoughts: *Did he really just say that? How could he be so honest? I have been in that too, but I never would have told anyone!*

As we conversed, two things became apparent. First, I deeply longed for the freedom to be vulnerable. Second, I was far more guarded than I'd ever realized. Because of Brent's self-honesty and kindness, the barriers in

my heart were simultaneously highlighted and crumbling. His vulnerability had opened the door to my own.

The following morning, I was rudely woken up by a stereo system booming throughout my house, joined by a rhythmic pounding on the floors beneath me. I was groggy and curiously opened my bedroom door to find Brent getting dressed in front of the hallway mirror. His right foot pounded the floor, and his right arm pumped with passion to Arcade Fire's latest album. For a moment, it felt as though I were at the zoo trying to understand the mannerisms of a species so beyond my comprehension. He turned to see me, and we both erupted in laughter. I returned to my room, reflecting on this odd, remarkable man. It struck me that someone who knows vulnerability is someone not afraid to dance. Vulnerability reduces shame and leads to freedom. The contrast to my own life at the time was not lost on me. Rather than filling me with contempt for how far I had to go in learning vulnerability, Brent's presence gave me hopeful imagination for what my life could become.

Practicing Vulnerability

Vulnerability requires risk, but it never bullies you to get there. The key to vulnerability is a movement toward personal integrity. You can wait for crisis to require vulnerability, or you can choose the vulnerability of integrity today. Your life experiences led you to believe you needed to be secretive in your quest for survival. But there is also something in you that recognizes that you could hide behind these defenses for the foreseeable future. Vulnerability honors your defenses, but it also challenges you to lay them down to receive the gift of being known by others.

Jeffrey, whom you met in the introduction (riding his bicycle around town as a child), would often discuss the sadness of being in a marriage in which his wife did not want a lot of time with him. Her job at a concert venue connected her with many people in their city's music community, and she sought them out routinely after the painful disclosure of Jeffrey's involvement with prostitution. Jeffrey said at the close of one session, "It's

a constant bind. I know I'm supposed to be strong and give her space, but the distance is even more painful than it was before. It's as if she is indulging in life outside me, and now I'm the one who gets to feel betrayed. I hate feeling this. It makes me want to act out again."

Clayton, who was abused by his uncle in the tent at his family reunion (see chapter 7), experienced increased difficulty knowing how to relate to his friends as therapy progressed. He wanted to share his story with friends but was scared about how it might be received. "Men talk about sex all the time but rarely about how much difficulty it brings into our lives." He wanted vulnerability but did not believe that his friends would be able to connect to his story of abuse.

One year into therapy, Clayton was experiencing depression and found himself intoxicated at a friend's holiday party. His friend observed his unusual binge drinking and invited him to the front porch to check in. Clayton made a rash decision to vent everything. "I'm miserable, man. I am a sex addict. I was abused by my uncle. I'm a perpetrator and a victim. No woman will ever want me." He left the party five minutes later, feeling exposed and ashamed.

As you can see, Jeffrey and Clayton are struggling to allow vulnerability to form the basis of their relationships. Jeffrey did not believe that his parents cared for him and unconsciously married a woman who would give him what he was accustomed to. Rather than sharing his desire for his wife, he remained guarded and surmised he would be more alone than ever before. Clayton too believed he needed to protect himself from others' learning his story, setting him up instead to carelessly vent the most vulnerable details of his life not in vulnerability but in desperation. When he did purge his story, he was drunk, sabotaging his ability to receive the care he deserved.

As Jeffrey and I explored the relational templates of his life, he recognized that to write a different story, he would have to let his needs and feelings be known to others. This started small. It began in therapy and then spread to his recovery group. Previously he would have buried his feelings

of abandonment, setting him up to buy sex again. Now he is allowing his feelings to connect him to others. Vulnerability does not guarantee a change to our external situations, but it provides pathways for others to offer us empathy.

The more Jeffrey practiced vulnerability with others, the more strength he gained to practice it with those who mattered most to him. He asked his wife one weekend if they could talk, and before he even got a word out, he was sweating profusely. He regrouped and told her how much he desired her and how little he felt he deserved to have her, because of his failures. He went on to share two stories of abandonment that left him to conclude that the significant people in his life would never stay around for very long. He acknowledged how this fear kept him from taking genuine interest in his wife and how lonely she must have felt in the marriage too.

Jeffrey's wife cried, never having realized how much he desired her. She was shocked by his confessed fear of departure, as it always seemed he was disinterested in who she was. She told him that one of the reasons she got a weekend job was that weekends were so painfully barren in their relationship. As their relationship leaned more into vulnerability, they began to address the patterns in their marriage that kept disconnection in place. His wife eventually stopped working on the weekends, and Jeffrey joined her in the things that brought her life. She eventually got into therapy as well after realizing how much easier it had been for her to live on her own than in a relationship with needs, vulnerabilities, and desires.

Clayton's depressive fog lifted when he determined he was going to reverse the crippling script of silence that marked his life. His passion extended outside his personal healing, and he wondered if his friends might also need to heal. He presumed they were living unreflectively in a male culture that ignores the reality of male sexual abuse and disguises male violence against women as innocent fantasies that are not hurting anyone.

I referred him to my friend Peter, who runs "'Stopping Sexual Exploitation: a Program for Men,' a ten-week transformative justice program for court and self-referred sex buyers based on principles of social

justice and personal transformation."[97] Clayton invited a number of friends to join him at a meeting, and two of them accepted. A few months later, the three of them were invited to address ways male students can be part of combatting sexual assaults on behalf of a local university. Clayton later said, "My wounds are now healing and protecting others. That's pretty cool."

I have given you examples of people persevering through the course of their unwanted sexual behavior. They have let their walls come down and received a compassionate response. Sometimes this is not how it goes. There are many who will get divorced, many who will need to step down from leadership positions, and many who will experience painful severing in relationships they would do anything to keep intact. You must remember that your behavior has brought harm, and therefore it is appropriate to anticipate anger and distance as a response. Your healing is not predicated on receiving the ideal response but on becoming a person of strength and vulnerability with your honesty.

How to Practice Strength and Vulnerability

Speak up for your dignity and the welfare of others. Where do you need to use your voice to stand up for your needs? There may be allergy-inducing animals in your home, unhealthy work schedules, demeaning coworkers, nasty landlords, obnoxious neighbors, or complicated friends. There is no glory in enduring foolish suffering. And where do you need to use your voice to stand up for the welfare of your partner, your colleagues, or immigrants in your neighborhood or city? How will you use your strength and gifts for good?

Tell your story and listen to others tell theirs. Novelist and political activist Anne Lamott said that the most powerful sermon in the world is two words: "Me, too." On July 7, 2015, she posted this entry to Facebook to provide a background to this quote and her struggle with alcoholism:

> On July 7, 1986, 29 years ago, I woke up sick, shamed, hungover, and in deep animal confusion. . . .
>
> I was 32, with three published books, and the huge local love of my family and life-long friends. I was loved out of all sense of proportion. I gave talks and readings that hundreds of people came to. I had won a Guggenheim Fellowship, although, like many fabulous writers, I was drunk as a skunk every day. I was penniless and bulimic, but adorable, and cherished.
>
> But there was one tiny problem. I was dying. Oh, also, my soul was rotted out from mental illness and physical abuse. My insides felt like Swiss cheese, until I had that first cool, refreshing drink. . . .
>
> So I showed up [to the meeting]. Before I turned on Woody Allen, he said that 80% of life is just showing up. And I did. There were all these other women who had what I had, who'd thought what I'd thought, who'd done what I'd done, who had betrayed their families and deepest values, who sat with me that day, and said "Guess what? Me, too! I have that too. Let me get you a glass of water." Those are the words of salvation: Guess what? Me, too. [98]

Your struggle with unwanted sexual behavior is the bridge that connects you to the compassion of others, and your courageous choice to know your story will blaze a trail of liberation to those caught in bondage.

BENEFITS OF STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY

The union of strength and vulnerability in relationships will make you one of the most remarkable people on the planet. Your strength does not allow you to be used, nor does it bring harm to others. Vulnerability invites you to

the possibility of care and deals a brutal blow to the power of shame. Fight or flight in relationships is reduced, and you experience rest with those you love.

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[97] “Peter Qualliotine: Co-founder, Organization for Prostitution Survivors,” World Without Exploitation, accessed March 8, 2018, https://www.worldwithoutexploitation.org/co-chairs/peter-qualliotine.

[98] Anne Lamott, Facebook, July 7, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/699854196810893.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

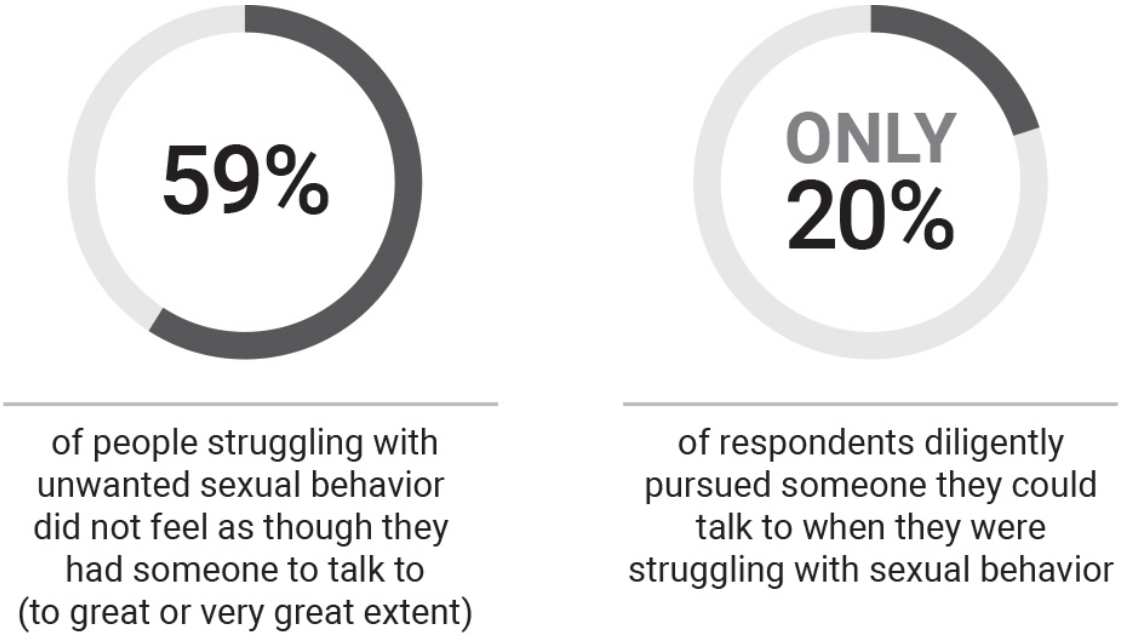
LEARNING TO INVEST IN COMMUNITY

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, we discovered how relationships are intended to be contexts for mutual formation and care. In these final chapters, we will explore how these relationships are applied in the context of community. Choosing to invest in a community is an important yet frightening choice. You might even wonder if asking you to invest in a community may be the most foolish request I have offered so far. You know better than anyone that the places of belonging (family, friendships, and faith communities) have been somewhere on the spectrum between egregiously unhealthy and nonexistent. A community setting is the very place where you experienced the painful realities of shame, abuse, hypocrisy, and abandonment. So what is the point of investing in community?

Community transforms us through growing our capacity to receive and offer love. Your relational life is the primary root of all past trauma, and for this story to change, you need your paradigm of relationships to be reimagined. For community to reach its full potential in your life, you must

1. Experience structure and accountability.
2. Learn to have your story held by others.
3. Offer empathy and curiosity for the stories of others.
4. Discover purpose, living for a bigger story.

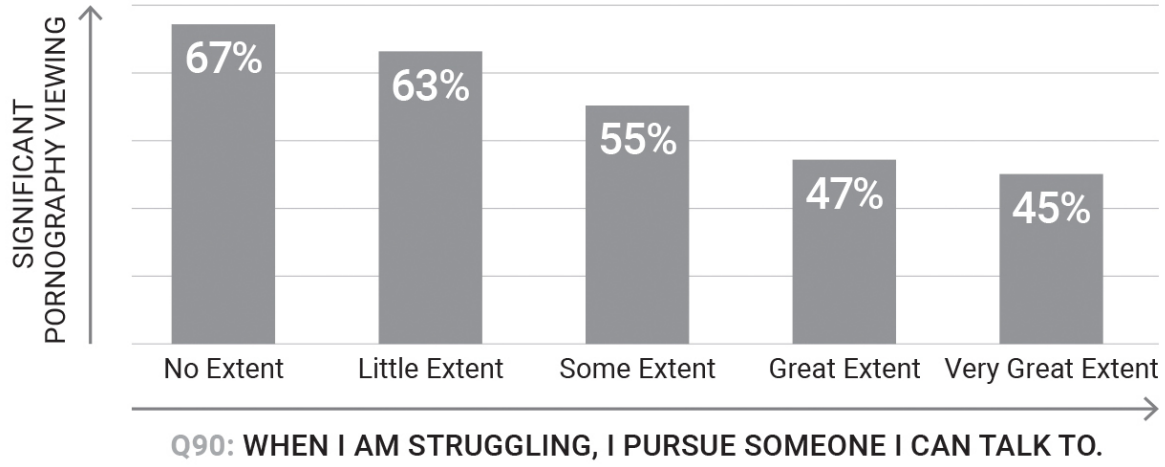
My research found that community was a beneficial yet tremendously underpursued aspect of life for people facing their own sexual brokenness:


59%
of people struggling with unwanted sexual behavior did not feel as though they had someone to talk to (to great or very great extent)
ONLY 20%
of respondents diligently pursued someone they could talk to when they were struggling with sexual behavior

This data shows that it is extremely likely that you believe you do not have someone to talk to. This may be due to the shame you bear for your behavior or for the ways you have isolated yourself from meaningful relationships. Overcoming this isolation will require intentional risk to weave yourself into a community of people. The best communities to look for are those that deeply understand the underlying issues associated with unwanted sexual behavior and have a large understanding that recovery is ultimately not about combatting the singular issues of lust but rather cultivating a deeper understanding of the desires, talents, and ambitions God wove into your heart.

As the graphic above showed, only 20 percent of people struggling with unwanted sexual behavior diligently pursued someone to talk to. Those who did saw considerable reduction in the amount of pornography they viewed:

There was a 22% REDUCTION in heavy porn viewing for those that greatly pursued someone to talk to compared to those who had no one to talk to.



As you can see, there was a 22 percent reduction in heavy porn viewing when respondents had someone to talk to.[99] The good news is that having the classic accountability partner helps some people significantly. But for many, even though they were diligent in pursuing someone to talk to, they continued to struggle with significant pornography viewing. This reveals that the current framework of accountability may reduce some shame and isolation but is inadequate in providing pathways to lasting freedom.

One of the reasons accountability fails to produce our desired results is that it becomes exclusively focused on lust and pornography. This is true whether you are about to take your first step into community or whether you have been doing it for years. The sentiment I routinely hear from millennial males goes something like this: “I am tired of talking about porn! I’ve got subject fatigue. We’ve all been talking about porn since middle school. Everyone knows we all use it, and no one really knows how to change it.” For community to be effective, we certainly have to address our sexual struggles. But we must do so through the lens that our sexual

brokenness is simultaneously using to show us the way to healing. Community is where we gather to understand and participate in one another's stories and together shape the destiny of our collective future.

Before we dive in, please take a moment to ponder your motivation to pursue community. Another reason that pursuits of accountability or intentional community fail is because many people feel pressure to "give back" or "pay it forward" too early. This is a natural experience, as some of the initial benefits we receive from an open and vulnerable life feel so liberating. We leave a meeting or a coffee with a friend and feel so much lighter after sharing a secret that has plagued us for decades.

The complexity is that the initial relief, gained through vulnerability, soon shifts to a familiar burden to care for others or present a "changed" version of ourselves far earlier than we should. This ushers us back to one of the core experiences of unwanted sexual behavior from part 2: deprivation. We begin to deprive ourselves of what is beneficial in order to give back to churches or communities what we think they want to see. Please know there is no obligation to give any of your time, story, or resources away because of what you learn. It may be that what you need more than anything is a place to belong, a place to discover purpose, not a place to lead.

[99] How to read this graph: 67 percent of people who "to no extent" pursued someone to talk to significantly used pornography, compared to 63 percent of people who "to little extent" pursued someone to talk to, 55 percent of people who "to some extent" pursued someone, 47 percent of people who "to great extent" pursued someone, and 45 percent of people who "to very great extent" pursued someone.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

COMMUNITY AS A PLACE TO EXPERIENCE STRUCTURE AND MUTUAL SUPPORT

WHEN WE ARE ENTRENCHED IN the ruts of our unwanted behavior, our motivation to change is rooted in a desire to be free *from* our behavior. Many people live their lives attempting to be free *from* difficulties such as sin, addiction, anxiety, and depression. This approach sets us up to toil in endless battles, measure our success based upon our win-and-loss record, and ultimately live like prey to the predatory difficulties of life. This method is exhausting and increasingly foolish, as it is rooted in an effort to "manage" sin.

The alternative to a freedom-from approach is to ask yourself, What might freedom be *for*? Consider a few questions for yourself. Why do you want to be free? Who are you doing all of this for? What hope and accomplishments might you be free to pursue if they weren't undermined by your unwanted sexual behavior? Pondering what freedom is *for* invites you to shift your focus from fixing yourself to an ability to dream redemption for a soul steeped in shame. If your hope is not moving your story into greater passion and comfort, your desire for freedom is too small.

A freedom-for approach challenges you to dream redemption for the most glorious and ruined layers of your desire. Evil baited your heart with counterfeits to satisfy these holy longings. Healing demands that you reclaim them as your own. Remember back to previous sections: Sabotage

occurs when you allow squatters to infiltrate your house of desire, and healing occurs when you fortify your protection of this beauty so that you are free to pursue joy.

The terrain of desire is where evil and God are most at work in your life. The kingdom of darkness works primarily to deaden and corrupt your desire. It wants your heart checked out in dissociative activities and the little desire left in your heart corrupted through perversion. When you resist these ploys, you become a very dangerous person to the kingdom of darkness because your existence shines a bright light in a boring and perverse world. Evil would rather you despise yourself in endless struggles. It wants you to exploit people in your emptiness. It wants your effectiveness in the world compromised. Therefore, healing is never fulfilled through the cessation of sin; even evil would agree to that armistice.

God, on the other hand, wants your heart to bloom with beauty, seeking after it so fervently that you begin to wonder if you might become one with beauty itself. Whereas addiction robs your desire, beauty plays your desire like a violin, drawing you to join others in a symphony. Freedom *for* beauty is the basis of accountability in community that you will pursue. Community joins us to others who are asking what songs might come if we gathered not for perfection but out of a growing desire for beauty.

Accountability

Ask most millennials about their experiences with accountability in the church and you will typically get a smirk or a look of worry. An accountability partner was essentially there to have a front-row seat to the "bad" sexual things you did in your life. Accountability became a form of Christian voyeurism. My clients and friends have told me about accountability jars where you had to put between one and twenty dollars in if you masturbated, looked at porn, or went too far with your significant other. My friend Jeremy recently told me about a viral meme from when he was in college that said, "Every time you masturbate, God kills a kitten."

Years later, after this generation completed college and started their careers, the struggles remained the same, and they became increasingly disillusioned with the word *accountability*.

The reason most relationships of accountability fail is that a person attempts to regulate the other's behavior without understanding the wider story of struggle in that individual's life. Consider this example: Will software alert you to the reality that when your spouse gets promoted at work, you, in your envy, become drawn toward a deeper involvement in pornography or an affair? Have church communities trained accountability partners to recognize that a person's unwanted sexual behavior may in fact be a repetition of early childhood sexual abuse?

For this to change, your task is to invite your community to turn from the policing of bad behavior to setting a stage for transformation. When my clients report beneficial experiences with accountability, they tend to tell me two things. First, the group's emphasis is on the key drivers, past and present, that influence unwanted sexual behavior rather than a heightened focus on maintaining purity. Second, the group emphasizes mutual participation and personal growth rather than dwelling on the powerlessness of their addiction or compulsive behavior.

A Word on Purity

A great deal of damage has been done to those who struggle with unwanted sexual behavior due to a misguided theology of purity that reduces sexual struggle to pure and impure behavior or wins versus losses. My clients often remark that purity theologies often feel similar to the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology. Sisyphus's punishment was to push a boulder up a hill, only to see it roll down again. He repeated this action for eternity. When you are struggling with unwanted sexual behavior, the boulder you spend most of your time attempting to push up a hill is purity, even if *purity* is used interchangeably with the word *sobriety*. Unfortunately, this is

encouraged by many Christian books and organizations that naively believe regulating purity will transform the lives of those most vulnerable to sexual brokenness.

A major point of the Gospels is to show that efforts to purify oneself are not only pointless but also destructive to those most likely to be condemned as impure by the religious establishment. Jesus is ferocious with the experts on the law and lays into them for the additional burdens they place on the most vulnerable. In Luke 11:46, he replies to the religious establishment, “You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.” Those struggling with unwanted sexual behavior do not need to be further loaded down with condemnation for their inability to reach purity. When purity culture becomes synonymous with surveillance culture, it must be seen as bordering on heresy.

If you are a Christian, you must remember that the issue of purity has already been addressed once and for all in the death of Jesus. There is no sin past, present, or future that you can commit that is not atoned for in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. You cannot become any purer in the future than you already are, even in the height of your acting out. Therefore, efforts to avoid lust or beat yourself up for a failure to reach purity are null and void. Your purity has already been accomplished and applied to your identity.

If the crosshairs of accountability are not aimed at purity, what should be the focus of accountability in the context of community? Richard Rohr argued that the most damaging aspect of someone’s life is not his or her failure but being disconnected from others. When we disconnect from community and our Maker, the inevitable fallout will be lives that wither and rot. The distinction is paramount for you to understand: You do not wither and rot because of your sin; you wither in sin because you are disconnected from the Vine. This disconnected self is what Jesus addresses in John 15:5-7:

> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Communities are at their best when they create space for individuals to explore the many reasons that connection has been so difficult. In this way, connection is an invitation, not a dogmatic demand in order to have a proper standing before God. Remember, relationships are the primary place of wounding in people's lives. Therefore, when joining a community, people's caution and suspicion naturally rise to the surface.

In the John 15 passage on the previous page, notice that even Jesus does not demand that others connect to him. His approach is more existential, like saying, "You want to be free of sexual sin? Well, you can . . . *if* you abide in me." A few lines later, in case there is any doubt creeping in about your ability to truly abide in him, Jesus brings you back to the most important image: God is in relentless pursuit of you. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love" (verse 9). God's design for sexual transformation is about a connection to love, not the fear of wrath. Shame aims to convince us that our unwanted behavior must be stopped *before* we can connect to others. Nothing could be more counterproductive. We connect so that we can heal.

In verse 10, Jesus continues teaching by telling his followers to keep his commands (which in verse 12 he defines as "Love each other as I have loved you") and that if they do, they will remain at home in his love. For Jesus, obedience is a relational category, not a behavioral one. This pattern is seen in other places throughout Scripture, most notably in Exodus 20 in the giving of the Ten Commandments. Before the first commandment is even uttered, God reminds the people of his relationship to them: "I am

GOD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery" (verse 2, MSG). We are not liberated from unwanted sexual behavior because of our obedience; obedience is the fruit of our liberation.

Mutual Participation: A Tribe of Allies

Many relationships of accountability fail because they are too limited in the scope of what they offer. When you are checking in with a friend or mentor primarily to assess how successful you were at managing your sexual behavior, your motivation for relationship will wane over time. If you want to change this experience of accountability, the focus must shift from voyeurism into one another's failures to mutual participation in one another's holistic lives.

Central to the healing path is to choose a tribe. Within this tribe, you will have allies, guides, and sages. An ally is a friend who will journey with you through the seeming monotony of life, as well as its challenges and glory. A guide is an individual trained in understanding the human heart and psyche. This could be a therapist, a pastor, or someone who has walked the journey of healing for several years more than you. A sage is a thought-leading pioneer whose ideas and insights actively shape your understanding of unwanted sexual behavior. You learn from sages through reading their books, listening to their podcasts, and maybe even pursuing conferences they are leading. For example, one of my sages is psychologist Dan Allender.

Now is a good time to think about the allies you would want to join your tribe. These are likely not friends from college or high school whom you connect with once or twice a year. Allies are those you tend to or could interact with on a more frequent basis. Though it is not a requirement, allies often function best in reasonable geographic proximity, such as people from a church small group or trusted coworkers. The emphasis of your allies is not so much about catching up with one another as it is about mutual participation.

There is an enormous difference between catching up on someone's life and participating in the person's life. Catching up with someone entails getting a drink or a meal and hearing a long summary of one another's career, family, and life stressors, usually a retrospective of what's happened since the last time you saw each other months ago. The time ends, and the final good-bye sounds something along the lines of "Let's not let another six months go by before we do this again." Relational inconsistency occurs because we are busy but also because we have predetermined that relationships require too much work, are too limited in scope, or are overrated for what they provide.

Participation is how we charge the dead batteries of our inconsistent relationships. When someone participates in your life, it may initially feel like curtains being pulled open after a long night of sleep. The light can hurt a little as it awakens you to a new day. Participation hones in on who you are and who you desire to become. Someone participating in your life keeps you accountable to your dignity even when you're seemingly obscured by sexual struggle. It is not that your struggles are incidental, but participation keeps accountability properly focused on who you are becoming in your new marriage, the father or mother you want to be to your adult children, and the dreams you are inching closer toward in your career. Participation frees accountability from the confines of a success/failure paradigm into a shared hope for what your life is intended to become. Whereas catching up focuses on the recent past, participation focuses on what's ahead.

We participate with our allies through consistent, enjoyable, and intentional time. For example, an epic ski trip with an old friend might be intentional and enjoyable but not consistent. A meeting with a sponsor or therapist may be consistent and intentional but lacks having enjoyment as an essential goal. Additionally, a monthly happy hour or run might be consistent and enjoyable, but the person accompanying you may have no desire or intention to pursue the topic of your recovery.

Choosing your tribe of allies does not necessarily mean you have to meet all new people. You likely have people you enjoy but have not taken the risk to invite them into deeper involvement in your life. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting with an ally. Examples from men and women in my private practice have been a man training with a dear friend for a half marathon (not everyone's definition of fun) to focus on physical health and engage in meaningful conversations about his marriage following his infidelity. One woman saw a number of her friends post #metoo responses on Facebook following the Harvey Weinstein scandal and decided to host a monthly brunch for women to talk about the ways their lives have been shaped by abuse across a lifetime. She told me after a few months that their discussions had ranged from eating disorders to sexual promiscuity. A bank manager made a list of the top twelve restaurants in his city and found an ally from church to join him once a month for a meal and to discuss their recovery process.

Pursuing a Group

Several years ago, Amnesty International attempted to give torture survivors individual therapy. Although it seemed like a helpful idea, it was largely ineffective. What the organization found instead was that torture survivors benefited the most from group work. Survivors of torture needed to have other survivors share their stories first. This approach created safety for new group members and allowed them to develop language for the trauma they had experienced.

The same principle is true when you first get involved with recovery. You need to hear the stories of other people's struggles—the rock-bottom moments of their addiction and how they failed to recognize how big their problems were. Hearing honest stories from others allows you to find the language and memories you most need in order to face your struggles head-on.

There are scores of groups out there for recovery from sexual addiction and pornography. There are classic twelve-step groups such as Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) or Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA). Many church communities have Celebrate Recovery groups focused on sexual brokenness. Dr. Mark Laaser has three-day Men of Valor workshops in Minnesota, and xxxchurch.com has online groups available for people across the country and also offers anonymous groups for pastors and clergy struggling with pornography addiction. NoFap, a secular online pornography recovery group, offers tools and challenges to help its members "reboot." Many individual certified sex addiction therapists (CSAT) trained by Dr. Patrick Carnes offer groups focused on sexual addiction recovery for twenty to forty dollars per session. The Allender Center has a lay counseling certificate (four-week program over the course of a year) that has you explore a significant trauma in week one, your family of origin in week two, sexual development in week three, and in week four an exploration as to how your wounds have developed great gifts within you and how those gifts might be used in the world. All this to say, there are many excellent resources out there, but you must determine which one most effectively fits your needs.

Your group experience will be most significantly shaped by the quality of the facilitator or therapist. From what I have observed in private practice and working with thousands of men and women over the years, recovery journeys that yield the greatest growth tend to have these features:

- Their guides were therapists or pastors who received specific training in human sexuality and trauma.
- If they were married, their spouses also got into their own therapy and groups to address their pain and marital patterns.
- Accountability was not solely focused on the "bad things" they did but on who they wanted to become.

- They were consistently involved in groups (twelve-step or ones focused on redeeming their sexual stories) *and* found mentors or sponsors they respected.

I tend to hear that when groups did not go well,

- The group facilitators came across as bullies or used manipulation to promote purity.
- The guides framed the clients' unwanted sexual behavior exclusively as "sins" or "heart issues" and chose to downplay the significance of childhood trauma and present-day roadblocks.
- The facilitators or therapists consistently pointed out their clients' addiction or battles with lust but provided no alternatives as to what healthy and beautiful relationships to sex might look like.
- The therapists or facilitators attempted to normalize the clients' behavior, despite the evidence of consequences. (One client's former therapist instructed the client's wife to get more comfortable wearing lingerie and encouraged them to find pornography that they both found arousing.)

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

COMMUNITY AS A PLACE TO OFFER EMPATHY FOR THE STORIES OF OTHERS

ATTUNEMENT IS THE FOUNDATION of empathy, and empathy is the glue of human connection. Researcher and author Brené Brown said, “Empathy doesn’t require that we have the exact same experiences as the person sharing their story with us. . . . Empathy is connecting with the emotion that someone is experiencing, not the event or the circumstance.”[100] The goal of empathy is not to try to make the other person’s struggle or difficulty disappear. Empathy says to the other person, “I know something of what that feeling is like, and I am here for you. Tell me a bit more about what you are going through.” With empathy, there is no pressure to curate the ideal response; a kind and honest presence is enough.

I think of empathy as a bird. To state the obvious, birds have two wings. The right wing of empathy is kindness, and the left one is honesty. A bird cannot fly terribly well with only one wing. What you will find is that people will dismiss or exploit you if you offer excessive niceness. And if you primarily offer honesty, they will gradually resent it and eventually distance themselves from you. To fly well with others, you need to develop both wings.

The wing of kindness is developed through receiving care from others and choosing consistent patterns of self-care. In experiencing kindness, you will be more attuned to the needs of others. The wing of honesty is developed through a growing maturity to engage the harm and dignity of

your life. If you can't see the way harm has marked your life, you will overlook it or minimize its impact on others. If you do not recognize the dignity of your own life, you will be blind to or dismissive of the dignity of others. Kindness is what draws others toward us, but it is our honesty that will lead to their respect.

Barriers in Our Brains

The insula is a part of the brain central to how we process emotions. It is also where our capacity for empathy and compassion resides. The field of psychology offers several explanations for why one's capacity for empathy might be impaired. The two environmental factors I find most applicable are early attachments to our parents, and past and present involvement with addictive technology. Let's look at each.

A study in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* showed that mothers who had early-life maltreatment became mothers with a lower sensitivity to the emotions and needs of their children.[101] To use language from a previous section, these are mothers who did not have attunement as children and, as such, became mothers who did not offer good enough attunement to their children. As you can imagine, children in these homes are at significant risk for repeating this generational cycle with their own children. If you know that your attachments with your parents were lacking or broken, you must assess the cost, lest you repeat these generational cycles. When you endure pain, abuse, and neglect but do not have supportive community around you, the likelihood of leaning on and eventually becoming addicted to a substance or unhealthy behavior will skyrocket. Our God-given need is to be oriented around attuned caregivers, but if those are absent, we turn toward surrogates, such as unhealthy people, premature sexual experiences, or devices.

The second environmental factor that is compromising our ability to offer empathy and curiosity to others is a dependence on technology such as video games, television, computers, and mobile phones. In a study published in the *European Journal of Radiology*, video-game addicts

showed significant atrophy in parts of the brain's gray matter (insula and frontal lobes).[102] In other words, addiction to a device leads to atrophy in the parts of our brains that we most need in order to connect with others. The tragedy for many children is that once they get closer to puberty, the neural networks established for video-game or online-gaming addiction (OGA) leave them vulnerable to addiction to pornographic material. The neurological grooves created for video games then get filled by the next addictive process. The very parts of our brains that are supposed to connect us to others end up shriveling and are used to keep us from others.

Learning to Grow Empathy

The good news is that you can grow the gray matter in your brain by becoming aware of your own body and emotions. Your brain has a sympathetic nervous system and a parasympathetic nervous system. The general function of your sympathetic nervous system is to mobilize your body's fight, flight, or freeze responses. When you are under threat, your sympathetic nervous system is devoted to keeping you alive. The general function of the parasympathetic nervous system is to control homeostasis and the body's rest-and-digest response. Your parasympathetic nervous system is what tells your body that it is okay to relax, take a deep breath, and connect with others.

The sympathetic nervous system can save your life when it is working well, but when your body is dysregulated by stress or trauma, it can obstruct your ability to connect with others. When the sympathetic nervous system takes over, it's not concerned with your reputation or retirement; its focus is on survival, and it will seek to eliminate anything that might present danger. When the sympathetic nervous system is taking over your life, you might find yourself invasively moving into someone's life (fight), retreating from difficulty (flight), or experiencing paralysis when you encounter difficulty (freeze). The first step to growing empathy for others is recognizing your primary barrier to connection with others: fight, flight, or freeze.

We grow our capacity to offer empathy to others through learning to engage our parasympathetic nervous systems. Prayer, meditation, and yoga will help us to do this. These activities help us cue into our emotional states, slow our heart rates down, take deeper breaths, and eventually send signals to our bodies to rest. When our bodies are safe, we are much more likely to be attuned to the emotional needs of others. In doing this, we grow the gray matter in our insula, the very material that atrophied during our addictions.

Empathic Conversations

To avoid having your fight-or-flight impulses stop you from showing empathy, you can actually practice connections of empathy before you attempt them. By writing out conversations that shape your empathy, you can begin to recognize what empathy sounds like coming out of your mouth and feels like in your body. More so, you can identify areas where fight-or-flight instincts might lure you from empathy. The following table offers some examples that distinguish empathic responses from reflexive responses.

Expression of pain or difficulty from another	**Empathic response**	**Flight response**	**Fight response**
I had the most frustrating conversation with my mom today.	Those can be the worst. I am so sorry to hear that. What did she say?	I am sure she didn't mean to be that frustrating. So how's your job going?	You think your mom is bad? You should meet my mother. She makes yours look like a saint.
No matter what good thing I tell her, she has to find fault in everything.	It's so sad she can't offer any delight in you. What were you trying to tell her about?	What mother isn't like that? I wouldn't let it bother you.	Don't let her pull that crap. Let her know how badly she's messed you up!
I really wanted her to be proud of this new job, but she just dismissed me.	I can only imagine how good her affirmation would have felt. It's so hard to hold both celebration and the silence of those closest to us.	Well, she probably just didn't know what else to say.	Why do you let her walk all over you? You need to stand up for yourself or she's never going to change.

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Our relationship with God is a new life in 'being there for others.'"[103] Offering empathy is one of the primary ways we practice this new life of

being there for others. Through empathy, we learn to attune to others rather than feel as if we need to solve their heartaches or distance ourselves from their difficulties. When we are connected to others, isolation is reduced. Without isolation, shame cannot flourish, thus cutting off the most significant tributaries into the swift rapids of sexually compulsive behavior. As you train your body to rest, you find that your ache for belonging has more substance than your drives for entitlement and counterfeit pleasure.

PRACTICING EMPATHY

Write down your strongest wing of empathy and think about a time when your kindness or honesty changed those around you. Write down your weakest wing of empathy and think about a time when your kindness or honesty was ignored or treated with contempt.

Start or join a group or book club addressing early childhood trauma and its interplay with addiction. Two excellent resources are Gabor Maté's *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* and Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*. Books like these will help shape your perspective on addiction and trauma.

Commit to practicing prayer, meditation, or yoga for one month. I recommend trying to start your day out with one of these activities if possible. There are several good apps out there for meditation/mindfulness. One I recommend to many clients is Headspace: Guided Meditation and Mindfulness. It is free for the first ten uses.

Practice consistent hospitality. Invite friends into your home and learn to share life through the sharing of a meal.

[100] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 81.
[101] Emilia L. Mielke et al., "Maternal Sensitivity and the Empathic Brain: Influences of Early Life Maltreatment," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 77 (June 2016): 59–66, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022395616300280.
[102] Chuan-Bo Weng et al., "Gray Matter and White Matter Abnormalities in Online Game Addiction," *European Journal of Radiology* 82, no. 8 (August 2013): 1308–12.
[103] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2010), 25.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

COMMUNITY AS A PLACE TO DISCOVER PURPOSE

Living for a Bigger Story

COMMUNITY IS ABOUT asking one another, "What do you *really* want? What is your purpose in this one, beautiful life you have been given?"[104] Throughout this book, you have been invited to see that the map of the world you were given was insufficient for finding the answers to these holy questions. As your life went on, unwanted sexual behavior and the systems you were part of set up further roadblocks to discovering your purpose. At this precipice in life, you need a new map for where to find purpose and a community of people hungry for the same journey.

The concept of an accountability partner can go only so far before you begin to experience "subject fatigue" around the topics of porn and masturbation. Accountability often fails because it is specifically focused on one dimension of your life. As you may recall, lack of purpose can increase a man's involvement with pornography by a factor of seven. If you have a good friend you meet with regularly, it would be far more profitable to scheme together about the dreams and desires you have for your lives. When you meet, do so to see how you can partner with one another in living for a bigger story.

The joy set before you is to heal the wounds of your sexual brokenness, recognize they do not have the final word in your life, and open a new map to travel to the places you've always wanted to go. Paradoxically, you will find that your wounds and struggles are the very things that have most

prepared you for the journey ahead. The ultimate defeat of evil is not the ability to bury your past; it is to allow wisdom to form within your wounds in order to guide you to a land you have yet to find. In God's economy, nothing is lost. Everything, even your sexual brokenness, belongs.

A Lesson from Poachers

In the nineties, the African country of Namibia was in a decades-long struggle to save their wildlife from aggressive poachers. A meeting was convened where government officials posed the question "Whom do we need to get to protect these animals?" The government needed a workforce with an intimate knowledge of the animals, a vast knowledge of the bush, and an astute understanding of the black market contributing to the devastating poaching. At the meeting, one official presented a counterintuitive and risky idea: "The poachers! They should lead our conservation efforts." Years later this idea became a reality, and today the notorious poachers of Namibia are at the forefront of the country's conservation efforts.[105]

Long before any Namibian took up poaching, they were exiled from their own wildlife reserves and forced into small plots of land to farm. This occurred in the sixties, when the apartheid government of South Africa controlled Namibia. In 1966, the United Nations told the apartheid to leave, [106] but before they finally departed, they gave ownership of the Namibian wildlife to predominantly white landowners. Exiled from their native lands, the Namibians worked small farms that did not provide for their basic needs. In the face of sweeping injustice, they took to their former game lands for food and profit.

As is the case with so many problematic behaviors, their poaching was rooted in their country's wounds and injustice. What ultimately brought transformation was the opportunity to take ownership of the land and fauna that had been stolen. Their healing was not in punishment but in the opportunity to find a new, generative purpose.

Remembering Where You Come From

Justin was an only child born to two Boeing engineers. He did well in school and excelled in soccer. Justin came to see me because his wife felt conflicted about his viewing pornography. He reported having used pornography since high school. He did not feel particularly bad about his behavior and thought his wife was being overdramatic. “It’s just something I do when I’m bored. We all have our ways to unwind, and I found one that works for me.”

We got to talking about his childhood, and I asked Justin to tell me about a typical evening in his family. “I’d get back from soccer practice, drop my soccer bag in the laundry room, say hi to my mom, take a shower, and then walk back upstairs, when I would hear the garage door open, signaling my dad was home. My dad and I would nod hello, and the three of us would sit down for dinner. Usually my mom would talk about her day or the latest stuff going on with her sisters. We would put our dishes in the sink, and my dad would go watch the news. My parents would tidy up for a bit and then say good night to me. From about eight o’clock on, I’d just be downstairs working on homework or in the basement watching TV.”

I inquired, “So it’s possible that you could go weeks without ever being asked how life was going?”

“Yeah,” Justin replied.

I pushed further. “And fair to say you could go months without ever being touched or hugged by either of your parents?”

“That sounds about right,” Justin replied.

When puberty hit, he watched *The Howard Stern Show* after his parents went to bed. He was drawn toward the sexual content of the show but even more to the commercials. Justin noted, “This was at the height of the Girls Gone Wild popularity. After 10 p.m., there were so many channels to see those ads on. That was always the most intriguing part of my day.”

It struck me that Justin’s adult life was a mirror reenactment of his childhood. As an adult, he would unwind into an alternative reality. I offered this interpretation to him, and he said, “Sure. But that’s what I’m

talking about. I don’t see anything wrong with it, and I feel irritated that my wife wants me to get therapy. Of course I wish I had other things to do besides porn. There are days I want something different, but I usually just feel stuck.” What Justin would go on to disclose was that he didn’t see his core issue as pornography but rather a profound sense of emptiness and boredom in life. “I don’t know what I want. I see a couple of my friends who are driven with their careers or seem to like their families. But I don’t feel any of that. I don’t know who I want to become.”

The world is full of people like Justin. He exists in every city across America, using pornography because of having little else to live for. Many men and women I work with pursue pornography because their lives are empty, so they drift off into the strong currents of perversion. When your life is characterized by a marked absence of delight, adventure, and intimacy with those you love, activities that kill time and hope by offering escape become increasingly central to your identity. Activities such as watching pornography, football, NASCAR, video games, TV, or virtual reality are all classic examples. In Justin’s story, you can smell a fundamental deadness in his home that brought about the necessity for an alternative reality. Pornography was available, far more so than a family or community encouraging him to discover an authentic identity.

Three Roadblocks to Purpose

If community is the context of transformation, it must overcome the roadblocks that keep us from discovering purpose. The first roadblock for those who struggle with sexual behavior is a pervasive experience of failure. More than 60 percent of people in my research look back over their lives and see only many failures. When my clients discuss their acute sense of failure, I invite them to survey the terrain we have covered in our work together: broken families, shame, abuse, meaninglessness, and anger. I point out that these experiences construct a very toxic image of who they are. Consequently, they flee to unwanted sexual behavior for relief but far

more to reinforce the core false belief that they will never be well. Their failure certainly includes their problematic sexual behavior, but its power is derived from their loyalty to past scripts.

The second roadblock to purpose is a community's preoccupation with sexual failure.[107] Communities often do a major disservice when they only engage the sexual failures of their members. Sexual addiction is a reality in our world, but I also fully believe that pornography can function as a red herring in many people's lives. A red herring is something intended to be misleading or distracting from the real issue at hand. Pornography is a prominent red herring of our time. Men live in an endless fight against the ills of pornography, and these battles are reinforced, if not encouraged, by our culture and religious communities. Men are invited to fight for purity but rarely asked who they want to become. Like Justin, when you are invited to only fight *against* something rather than pursue purpose *for* something, you are merely caught in the flow of an addiction:

> meaninglessness → escape pain and boredom → pursue unwanted sexual behavior as poison, anger, and counterfeit identity → feeling unwanted → meaninglessness

The cycle repeats until you are invited into a different story.

The third roadblock to purpose is a deafness to your existential cries. In my research, 56 percent of respondents struggled to find purpose, and more than 57 percent felt unmotivated in life. One way of thinking about these statistics is to see watching pornography as a symptom of an unlived life. If we are trying to get rid of the symptom but do not know what we want instead, our efforts will be in vain.

In Western culture, our default engagement with symptoms is to medicate rather than listen to what they are communicating. We feel pain, depression, or anxiety and immediately pursue a pill or drink. This impulse to treat rather than listen to our symptoms is at the root of our cultural pathology.

A French psychoanalyst named Jacques Lacan believed there was no one in the world without a symptom.[108] Lacan did not view a symptom as an outside intruder preventing us from having a normal life. Instead, a symptom was more like a prophet, attempting to get our attention regarding a way of life that was not working and inviting us to find a new way forward. What if your agonizing involvement with pornography is not an alien intruder that must be assassinated but rather a symptom God wants you to bring to your community in order to discover your life purpose?

Jeremiah, a prophet in the Old Testament, compared the people of God to camels in heat, "sniffing . . . for the slightest scent of sex" (Jeremiah 2:23-24, MSG). You can almost imagine him, if he were alive today, heading out to the wilderness of unwanted sexual behavior and calling us Internet search junkies, clicking on any link or image or app with the slightest scent of sex. Prophets expose us to what is most true, but they also awaken us to dreams more beautiful than we would have ever conceived. Unwanted sexual behavior exposes us to our preoccupation with sex, but it also challenges us to hear our cries for purpose beyond the hobbit-sized homes we have constructed.

Becoming an Agent of Change

Effective agents of change do not bury their pasts; they allow the past to reveal and transform their purposes. It could be that God is going to call you to allow your specific struggle with unwanted sexual behavior to be a light to others who dwell in shame. But your struggle could also be the invitation to take greater authority as an agent of change as a parent, spouse, leader in your dorm, or vocational leader. As I stated earlier, there is no obligation to pay your healing forward. Instead, when the seeds of healing grow, the fruit will be a life oriented around the welfare of others.

If you sense that your calling might be to reenter the world of unwanted sexual behavior as a guide, you have my support. Across the globe, women who have known harm in prostitution and pornography are now leading survivor services for other women and girls trapped in that

lifestyle. Likewise, men who have been the primary perpetrators of sexual violence and consumption of women are now leading groups to educate men about not using their gender as a means for entitlement. When pastors and community leaders ask me, “What can be done about the epidemic of pornography and sex buying in our cities? Who can change this for the next generation?” I often find myself saying, “The addicts! The addicts who have come to know their stories.” What our churches and cities need most are men who want more than to dart their eyes away from lust. We need men who want to step on the neck of evil that promotes violence against women as the antidote to masculine wounds.

If you sense that your calling is to step into your marriage and family with greater passion and loyalty, you also have my support. I do not believe there is anything more powerful than the ability for children to grow up witnessing a marriage that lives out the ability to offer honesty and honor for one another. Many clients I work with speak to a deep desire within them to have an enduring legacy in their families. They see generations of addiction and disengagement in their families and sense that their chief calling is to heal in order to bring flourishing instead.

If you sense a desire to cultivate your creativity in your vocational field, go for it. You have my support. Part of your healing journey requires the ability to translate idle time historically consumed by your addiction into a channel for cultivating your talents. Many of my clients inevitably recognize that addiction consumed their creative energy. As they heal, they feel rejuvenated and begin to unleash their creativity. Creativity looks different in each person’s life. For some it means moving from mid-level players in their organizations to executive leaders. Others choose to write and publish poetry. Some join jazz bands or rugby teams. Others launch organizations devoted to offering healing to others caught in similar traps. The mark of healing is not merely the cessation of problematic behavior but rather a life filled with greater passion, contribution, and purpose.

DISCOVERING A GREATER SENSE OF PURPOSE

Write down three of your greatest life goals. After you jot them down, reflect how unwanted sexual behavior sets up roadblocks to achieving them. For example, you may want to influence change in an organization or academic field but find yourself using pornography far too often instead. Or you might want to be a good dad who spends time with his family but instead get involved with affairs on business trips. When you arrive back home, your guilt and hypocrisy keep you from fully investing in your ultimate goal of family.

Write down two ways unwanted sexual behavior keeps you or others focused on your failure rather than encouraging you to discover who you want to become. For example, it could be a parent that found your Internet search history but rarely found you to invite you to go camping or take you out shopping or to a movie. It could be that you were shamed for promiscuity as an adolescent or young adult, but no one cared to take notice of the sexual abuse that happened years prior.

Annie Dillard—in her Pulitzer Prize–winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—wrote, "I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."[109] Dillard is describing the moments in life where something deep within us is struck and we ring with joy and meaning. Write down three examples of when your heart was struck with meaning or joy in the context of community. It could be a perspective you offered to your organization that changed the trajectory of a project; a friend naming something about your character, gifts, or wounds that you never could have articulated for yourself; or a time you offered insight and empathy to a family member and their gratitude sank deeper and deeper into your heart. Think of these as your "record-setting moments," when you recognized you loved the person you were in the story. The three examples you recall will provide a valuable window into the person you already are

and the person you long to become. Notice the patterns across the stories. What impact recurs across them? How are these stories emblems of your "best self"?

Share your reflections with a trusted friend. What you've observed about yourself will give him or her a window into the ways evil works to thwart your purpose, how you were harmed in the context of longing, and the full glory of what you might become if sexual struggle did not consistently sideline you. Additionally, invite those in your community to share other experiences of where they have seen your gifts bring transformation or times when they witnessed you struggling to bring your voice to the community.

BENEFITS OF A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Discovering a sense of purpose is the most powerful way to disrupt a life of sexual brokenness. Sexual struggles saturate you with shame and keep the focus on your failures rather than on who you desire to become. Community recognizes that sexual struggles are real but should never eclipse the larger picture of your life purpose. Each year in community, you will discover more about who you are. In response, gratitude will grow within you, as you will know that your gifts do not remain buried and your talents have not been sabotaged.

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[104] This idea is taken from Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day." The closing line: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

[105] John Kasaona, "How Poachers Became Caretakers," 15:39, February 2010, TED2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/john_kasaona_from_poachers_to_caretakers.

[106] "South Africa and the United Nations, 1946–1990," South African History Online, March 30, 2011, http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/south-africa-and-united-nations-1946-1990.

[107] This does not mean that involving yourself in an SA, SAA, or Celebrate Recovery group is detrimental to your purpose. At least one community group for a season should focus on your unwanted sexual behavior.

[108] Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome* (New York: Wiley, 2016), seminar 23.

[109] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 36.

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Conclusion

WE LIVE AT A CRITICAL INFLECTION POINT IN our world's relationship to sex. Sexual pain and confusion are commonplace. The debris of sexual violence is scattered across every continent. Virtual reality porn and sex dolls fill an already bloated market for sexual perversion. The #metoo movement, systemic sexual abuse cases, sex trafficking, and violence against LGBTQI fill our newsfeeds. As we look at the debris, all we seem to be able to collectively do is blame one another.

We blame liberal culture. We blame conservative culture. We blame people with power. We blame the marginalized. We excuse misogyny through blaming sex addiction. We blame those who genuinely suffer with sex addiction. Few groups, however, have the humility to recognize the unique ways their approach contains truth but also contributes to the decay of sexual beauty in our world.

The widespread remedies we've forged leave much to be desired. Militant surveillance and accountability will only go so far in maturing men and women. Hookup cultures that invite us to sexual pleasure without the pursuit of meaning will leave another generation disillusioned and confused about sex. God designed our hearts to be full of desire and meaning, restless until we find it. Therefore, approaches aimed at mitigating sexual desire or diminishing sexual meaning inevitably lead to sexual exile.

A high calling on the life of a Christian is to be the light of the world. In our arrogance (and perhaps unwittingly), we have too often believed being light is about making sure the world lives "right." The sexual themes we care about and those we refuse to care about reveal our co-opted interests in maintaining power and asserting authority. We want the world to

change, but given that the rates of unwanted sexual behavior are similar inside and outside the church, let's be honest about who among us is in the greatest need of redemption.

Being the light of the world in our particular era of history might look like shining the light on our own need for repentance—our own need to change direction. The sexual world is out of orbit for a variety of reasons, and it's time to lead through owning our unique contribution.

Central to the gospel we proclaim is a belief that God is active in our story, inviting us to participate with him in restoring all things. For this reason, God loves to invite us to use our story—the broken family, lack of purpose, lustful, angry, shame-full stories—to bring personal and communal healing. In community, the trampled grapes of our collective stories are gathered and transformed into something more stunning than we could have ever conceived. God is the Master Vintner, taking stories of sexual shame and transforming them into the very wines of blessing. In God's economy, nothing about your sexual brokenness is wasted; it's all part of the redemption brew.

Since I completed my research study and wrote several articles addressing the *why* behind unwanted sexual behavior, e-mails and letters have come pouring in. Scores have asked me to interpret sexual fantasies they've been puzzled by. One woman shared the heart-wrenching ways her grandfather set up her introduction to pornography under the guise of a movie night tradition. Too many have told horror stories of how their sexual behavior or sexual identity was addressed by their churches or universities. Countless spouses have written trying to understand why their partners pursue sexual behaviors that seem so inconsistent with everything they thought they knew about them.

The most common response, though, goes something like this: "I've always tried to stop my porn use with prayer or accountability. You name it, I've tried it. I now recognize why those methods haven't been effective—they didn't address the specific reasons that drive me to my unwanted

sexual behavior. I always thought God was irritated with me for not being able to quit. Now I see how my sexual brokenness is pointing to a fuller picture of what healing could be."

These responses tell me that the research findings are striking a nerve. We want to be understood. We want to be known. We want to know that everything that is broken within us can be made whole.

I dedicated this book to the women and men who completed my research survey. This was not a frivolous decision. In sharing the most significant themes of their lives and the most specific details of their sexual struggles, they allowed for remarkable insights to be obtained from the data. The research was not a means to an end; it was a means to bring light to those who live in the shameful shadows of unwanted sexual behavior. The respondents told stories, in the form of data, to show us that if we pay attention, sexual brokenness can reveal our way to healing.

This is just the beginning.

My commitment to you is to continue pressing into sexual brokenness with kindness, curiosity, and skill. There is so much we are discovering. And of course, the more we know, the more we realize how much more there is to learn. What do you say we keep learning together? I've created a page on my website—jay-stringer.com/journey—where you can share your story in future research or sign up to be the first to get key insights when findings are available. When we learn from one another, we aid our collective freedom.

I fully recognize that if you've gotten this far in the book, it's likely you are filled with many conflicting, raw emotions. You are fearful. You are angry. You are thrilled to have glimpses of answers you've long hungered for. You are heartsick for all you have lost. You may even want to hit fast-forward and have the grueling work you've read about be successfully behind you. And mostly, you get to entertain the very dangerous prospect of hope.

Dare you believe your story might be made whole? That yes, even *your* sexual brokenness can reveal the way to healing? If you begin down this path, will it lead to what your heart longs for, or will it once again corner you with disappointment? I did not invite you to this place lightly. From the beginning, my aim in writing this book was to guide you to an inflection point of your own. What I have witnessed is that those who find the courage to pursue their unique reasons that bring them to unwanted sexual behavior are mysteriously met by the transforming love and kindness of God. You can find the restoration your heart has longed for. It will not be easy, but it is absolutely possible.

I close with the words from Jeffrey, the man you met in the introduction. As you read his words, remembering how dreadfully his story began, join me in imagining the hopeful words like these that you, too, might someday write:

> My name is Jeffrey. I was the one who used to ride my bike throughout my neighborhood, hoping to lock eyes with my schoolmates. It's an odd and rare opportunity to be invited to conclude a book on an area of my life that nearly robbed me of everything. Sexual brokenness was trying to get my attention for a real long time. I didn't know whether I wanted it to stop or have it go on forever. Sexual behavior filled me with shame, but it was also the only doorway I could enter to get what I wanted. Only years later am I able to say there is so little imagination and beauty that exists inside the vortex of unwanted sexual behavior.
>
> What I've learned on my journey is this: Unwanted sexual behavior is an opportunity to be transformed by love. My unwanted sexual behavior was evidence of a lot of things, but until I allowed it to be evidence of my need for love and the necessity for personal growth, I stayed in hiding. There is so much joy out

there to be found. It happens when you enter the wild, unpredictable terrain of your own story and discover all the beauty that exists within it.

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Research Appendix

THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH was to conduct an initial field study into the parental and childhood experiences that impact maladaptive adult fantasy and sexual behavior. The researcher introduced a new survey, the Stringer Survey of Sexual Fantasy and Behavior (SSSFB), to conduct the research; therefore, the secondary purpose of the research is to obtain validity evidence for the SSSFB.

The sample obtained for the study was a convenience sample of 3,817 adults who volunteered to complete the survey anonymously. These volunteers were part of mailing lists or social-media sites maintained by organizations that exist to help those struggling with unwanted sexual behavior. The offer to participate was made via e-mail and social-media feeds by the organizations. The solicited volunteers may have shared the link with others who also completed the SSSFB. The SSSFB was administered online. A link in the e-mail brought the volunteer to the landing page for the SSSFB. The SSSFB data were collected between November 2016 and January 2017.

No personally identifying information was gathered (e.g., name, address, personal identifications, etc.) by the survey. The data set provided for data analysis contained only five demographics (gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, age category, and marital status) and a random number to identify unique records.

Demographics

The survey participants were primarily male (73 percent) and primarily heterosexual (92 percent). These sample characteristics are consistent with the sample characteristics of other studies of this population. Participant ages ranged from eighteen to more than sixty-five, with more than two-thirds of the participants falling in the age range of eighteen to thirty-two years old. The participants were primarily white (78 percent); 58 percent were single, and 37 percent were married.[110]

SSSFB Validity and Reliability

The SSSFB is comprised of 103 self-report items rated on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = No Extent, 2 = A Little Extent, 3 = Some Extent, 4 = Great Extent, and 5 = Very Great Extent. There are twenty statements related to Mother or Father communications with the participant, fifteen statements about "In my childhood," seven statements about sexual fantasy and behavior "in the last year," thirty-one statements about different types of sexual fantasy and behavior, eight statements about "I pursue sexual fantasy or behavior when . . ." and twenty-two statements about "In my life . . ."

These statements were submitted to a series of exploratory factor analyses with a principal components analysis and varimax rotation. Various factor solutions were reviewed to assess the dimensionality of the SSSFB. An eighteen-factor solution including 93 of the 103 statements was considered most suitable from a statistical and theoretical perspective. The eighteen-factor solution excluded from the analysis items 74–81.

A confirmatory factor analysis was performed on the eighteen factors. Confirmatory factor analysis results for the SSSFB indicate a moderately good fit with the eighteen topics (CFI = .783, TLI = .762, SRMR = .06, and RMSEA = .049). This provided a good basis for proceeding with the eighteen topics and modeling relationships among the eighteen topics and demographics. Finally, the reliability of the eighteen topics (scales) was assessed. The scale-reliability coefficients were fair to very good: Eight were between .63 and .69, five were between .70 and .79, and five were between .80 and .83.

The SSSFB contains eighteen scales, including

1. Infidelity
2. Power
3. Subordinate Self
4. Subordinate Others
5. Depression
6. Needs Not Met
7. Overwhelmed
8. Lack of Purpose
9. Shame
10. Mother Confide
11. Mother Ignore
12. Mother Strict
13. Father Confide
14. Father Ignore
15. Father Strict
16. Childhood Sexual Abuse
17. Bullied in Childhood
18. Resilience

Odds Ratios

The odds ratios in this research indicate how the predictor variables impact the odds that the outcome variable (e.g., Pay for Sex) will occur. For example, when identifying the predictors of Pay for Sex, the variable Shame had an odds ratio of 7.94 for males. This means that for a unit increase in the Shame score, the event, Pay for Sex, is nearly eight times more likely to occur. Shame is strongly associated with Pay for Sex.

Similarly, the variable Resilience had an odds ratio of .16 for males. This means that for a unit increase in the Resilience score, the event, Pay for Sex, is 16 percent as likely to occur compared to males with Resilience scores one unit lower. Resilience is strongly associated with Pay for Sex for males.

Large-odds ratios do not necessarily mean that an event has a high probability of occurrence. For example, when comparing two participants' scores for Childhood Sexual Abuse, if Person A's score is one unit higher (one unit equals about fourteen points for Childhood Sexual Abuse) than Person B's score, Person A is twenty times more likely than Person B to pay for sex. This does not mean that Person A has a high probability of paying for sex. As the data indicate, few males pay for sex. But when two low-probability events are compared, one probability can be twenty times greater than another probability. For example, if Person B's probability of paying for sex is .5 percent and Person A's probability is twenty times the .5 percent, Person A's probability is 10 percent. Person A's probability of paying for sex is low, but relative to Person B, it is twenty times higher.

The same could be said for small-odds ratios. As stated above, in this study, the variable Resilience had an odds ratio of .16 for males. The small-odds ratio is not referring to the fact that the event is unlikely; rather, it refers to the fact that compared to a participant with a lower Resilience score (about thirteen points lower), participants with higher scores are only 16 percent as likely to pay for sex.

Survey Demographics

Sex		
Male	**Female**	**Total**
2787	1030	3817
73%	27%	100%

Ethnicity	**Sex**		**Total**
	Male	**Female**	
Hispanic	159	64	223
	5.7%	6.2%	5.8%
American Indian and Alaska Native	21	10	31
	0.8%	1.0%	0.8%
Asian	195	42	237
	7.0%	4.1%	6.2%
Black	152	43	195
	5.5%	4.2%	5.1%
White	2153	820	2973
	77.3%	79.6%	77.9%
Two Races	107	51	158
	3.8%	5.0%	4.1%
Total	2787	1030	3817
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Sexual Preference	**Sex**		**Total**
	Male	**Female**	

Heterosexual	2580	929	3509
	92.6%	90.2%	91.9%
Homosexual	88	20	108
	3.2%	1.9%	2.8%
Bisexual	119	81	200
	4.3%	7.9%	5.2%
Total	2787	1030	3817
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Age	**Sex**		**Total**
	Male	**Female**	
18 to 24	1130	554	1684
	40.5%	47.1%	44.1%
25 to 32	696	252	948
	25.0%	24.5%	24.8%
33 to 42	390	115	505
	14.0%	11.2%	13.2%
43 to 52	236	71	307
	8.5%	6.9%	8.0%
53 to 64	254	35	289
	9.1%	3.4%	7.6%
65+	80	2	82
	2.9%	0.2%	2.1%
NA	1	1	2
	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Total	2787	1030	3817
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Marital Status	**Sex**		**Total**
	Male	**Female**	
Single	1571	641	2212
	56.4%	62.2%	58.0%

Married	1084	312	1396
	38.9%	30.3%	36.6%
Separated	35	19	54
	1.3%	1.8%	1.4%
Widowed	10	8	18
	0.4%	0.8%	0.5%
Divorced	87	50	137
	3.1%	4.9%	3.6%
Total	2787	1030	3817
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

[110] The percentage of single (58 percent) and married (37 percent) participants does not total 100 percent. Some participants were separated, widowed, or divorced.

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Acknowledgments

I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I have deserved. . . . And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led—make of that what you will.

WENDELL BERRY, *JAYBER CROW*

To the One who has led me: Thank you.

To my friends at Awake Church and my former pastor Ben Katt: You first invited me to address the demand for commercial sexual exploitation as our church sought to understand faithful presence in our north Seattle neighborhood. To Dan Allender and my colleagues at the Allender Center: You have most informed my perspective on unwanted sexual behavior and invited me to see the power that exists in a story no longer bound by shame. The human heart is more beautiful and mysterious because of you. To my clients: You have trusted me, taught me, and astounded me in your ability to choose grief and joy against the backdrop of crisis and heartache. I could not have written this book with integrity had I not seen the gospel so wildly and authentically played out in your lives. To Don Pape and Dave Zimmerman: The titles of publisher and editor do not begin to describe the complexities, talent, and poise you exhibit in your positions. Thank you to everyone at NavPress and Tyndale for believing in the vision and carrying it to publication. To Jason Pamer and *The Heart of Man* team: The support

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To my dad: The eyes I have to see the complexity, tragedy, and beauty of life were sharpened because of you. To my mom: The heart I have to experience the cup of life—its joys and sorrows—was expanded because of you. To my siblings, Rachel, Justin, and Stephen: Each of you, through the honesty of your lives, has taught me the unlikely road to joy through the inevitable suffering that finds us. To my Smith and Michalowski family, Gary and Nan, Dave and Morgan, Graham and April: Your generosity and love for me is lavish. Your lives and your marriages inspire me. I am so honored to have a front-row seat to everything you all are becoming.

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To my love, Heather: To know you is to encounter beauty in all its alluring, transformative, and enigmatic features. I cherish you. This book would not exist if you did not believe that love is found not only in shared intimacy but also in setting one another free to discover the deepest longings we were put on earth to find. What do you say we keep going?

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About the Author

JAY STRINGER is a licensed mental-health counselor and ordained minister. He has spent the last decade working on the front lines of the demand for pornography and sexual exploitation. He holds an MDiv and master of counseling psychology from The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology and received postgraduate training under Dr. Patrick Carnes and Dr. Dan Allender. As a writer, speaker, and therapist, Jay guides men and women through the shameful portions of their stories and into a journey of meaning and healing.

For additional resources on sexual brokenness, go to jay-stringer.com/resources.

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